

Noelle Holiday, the Spectacular Spider-Doe
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Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandoms:	Deltarune (Video Game) , Spider-Man - All Media Types
Relationships:	Noelle Holiday & Kris , Dess Holiday & Noelle Holiday , Noelle Holiday/Kris
Characters:	Noelle Holiday , Kris (Deltarune) , Dess Holiday , W. D. Gaster , Asgore Dreemurr , Toriel (Undertale) , Asriel Dreemurr , Mayor Holiday (Deltarune) , Berdly (Deltarune) , Chara (Undertale) , Susie (Deltarune) , Original Deltarune Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Superheroes/Superpowers , Alternate Universe - Spider-Man Fusion , Action/Adventure , Family Drama , Superheroes , Grief/Mourning , (because Rudy is the Uncle Ben of this one)
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Spider-Rune
Stats:	Published: 2024-01-26 Completed: 2024-05-17 Words: 105,730 Chapters: 17/17

Noelle Holiday, the Spectacular Spider-Doe

by [doyouhearthunder](#)

Summary

Noelle Holiday lives her life with her hooves on the ground and her head in the clouds. Between dodging bullies at school, trying to turn her love of science and engineering into a potential job at Gastcorp, and holding her family together in the wake of her father's untimely death, she's carrying a lot on her shoulders.

When life gets hard, Noelle likes to daydream about swinging through the streets of New Home City like her favorite local superhero, the Amazing Spider-Human. But Noelle herself is no hero. She's just an ordinary girl in a world of marvels, dreaming of having the power to protect the people she loves. She never expected those dreams would come true. Not until the day when a fateful accident grants Noelle power that rivals that of Spider-Human herself. Power that could change her life forever.

Because with great power there must also come great responsibility, and Noelle is quickly drawn into a web of family secrets and criminal

schemes that threatens to envelop every aspect of her life. Unless, that is, she can rise to the occasion, stand up for what's right, and become the hero that she was born to be: The Spectacular Spider-Doe!

Notes

Last summer, after the release of a little movie called Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse, fellow Deltarune fic author AnonymousBoopleSnoot and I were discussing the potential of a DR Spider-Man AU. As a lifelong Spidey fan myself, the idea immediately sparked my imagination, and since Boople decided he had enough writing projects on his plate already, he graciously let me tackle this one.

Should've known I'd end up with another novel on my hands. It's taken me months of writing to hammer together a complete story (or at least the first arc of one), but Boople has remained a beta reader and brainstorming partner throughout the entire process. So many bits and pieces here, from dialogue exchanges to entire plot points, were either conceived or improved through his input. So this one's for you, Boop - I can't thank you enough for all the help.

Now without further ado, let's get reacquainted with a certain beloved deer girl at the beginning of a brand new kind of adventure, shall we? Onward, True Believers!

Chapter 1: Amazing Fantasy

On the Friday before her life changed forever, Noelle Holiday was running late to school.

She'd been up much too late the previous night putting the finishing touches on the final project for her Gastcorp engineering internship. She knew that school was important too, as her mother often reminded her, but high school was also *easy*. Noelle was a straight-A student, top of her class, and itching to graduate and get out into the wider, more challenging world. The internship provided a taste of that challenge, something that she could actually sink her teeth into.

Trouble was, she'd bitten off a little more than she could chew last night, and now she was bleary-eyed and exhausted, cramming a hastily assembled sandwich in her mouth as she hurried out the door to catch the bus that would take her across town to East Monsterhattan High. Hopefully *before* the bell rang; Noelle didn't want to start a pattern of tardiness now, not when her mother was almost certain to hear about any black mark on her otherwise perfect attendance.

She made it to the bus stop huffing and puffing, only to soon realize that the bus was late. Go figure.

Noelle often wished she could just fly to school, but being a deer monster, she lacked wings like her classmate Berdly had. Reindeer couldn't do anything special: she had a tuft of a tail that made shopping for appropriately tailored skirts and pants a nuisance, hooves that eliminated the need for shoes entirely, and antlers that served no practical purpose aside from making low-set door frames a hazard. That was it. Every other advantage she had came from her family.

Well, and her brain, but being smart wouldn't save her if she was *late to school!!*

She never used to be late, because her mom used to give her a ride on the way to work. But these days Carol Holiday was not even there to make her daughter breakfast in the morning, let alone drive her to school. As the mayor of New Home City, her mother's day began even earlier than Noelle's. Mayor Mom would already be out the door and on her way to City Hall when Noelle woke up, relying on the younger Holiday's self-discipline to get her to school on time.

Things had been different, Noelle thought bitterly as she watched the street for the bus, when her father was still alive. Everything had been better back then. The burglar who had shot and killed Rudy in his own home the year before had fled the scene and was never apprehended, and the tragedy had forced the issue of crime in the city into the center of her mother's reelection campaign.

Carol was running on a hardline law and order platform, promising to crack down on crime, while her detractors - like her opponent in the general election, wealthy business owner Asgore Dreemurr - argued that she'd had her chance and

a change was needed. But Noelle's mother had a cause and a sympathetic story on her side, and seemed confident she could secure another term in the most powerful position in monsterkind's biggest city.

So now Noelle had one dead parent and one overworked and absent one, with nothing but academics and engineering to distract herself from the lonely and helpless feeling in her heart.

Even December hadn't been around to support her much lately. Dess had been angry and listless since their father's death, and had taken to staying out all night, no doubt drowning her sorrows in booze and reckless behavior. She would come home at dawn and sleep into the afternoon. Noelle worried about her, but whenever she asked Dess where she'd been, her older sister just said something vague and mysterious like "Burning the midnight oil until it scorches my fingertips," or "Living fast and dying never, baby!" Eventually Noelle got the hint and stopped asking.

Ah, finally. The bus was coming. Noelle checked her watch impatiently before flashing her student ID to the driver and hopping aboard. She settled in the back corner, her favorite spot on any bus, and spent the ride to school double-checking her completed homework and rubbing sleep out of her eyes.

She couldn't afford to be sleeping poorly right now; not only did she have a full day of classes ahead of her, but she was due at Gastcorp first thing tomorrow morning. Saturday was the day that her internship with the billion-dollar biotech corporation would culminate in the presentation of the independent study project she'd been working on for months. The interns were given free rein to pursue their own interests using Gastcorp's laboratory resources (with supervision, of course), and Noelle had struck on an idea for her project that she thought was equal parts innovative, practical, and just plain cool.

And sticky. It was also very sticky. But if the adjustments she'd made to the delivery mechanism last night did the trick, she *knew* it could work!

That was why she'd been up late tinkering. Sure, her project wasn't being graded, and it wasn't like her GPA depended on finishing her internship with a fully-functioning prototype in her hands, but her *pride*, her *reputation*, that was another matter. She was a Holiday, and as her mother kept telling her, Holidays were meant for great things.

(Unless you were Dess, aimlessly drinking your life away. Or her father, turned to dust on the floor of his own living room before even making it to retirement.)

Oh look, here was her stop! And not a moment too soon.

The school day passed mostly in a daze. Noelle may not have slept much, but she *had* studied, and there were thankfully no quizzes or major assignments due until

next week, so it was another average day of listening to lectures and taking notes. The topic in her Biology class this week was human biology, which was at least interesting. Human biology was so different from monsters!

As part of her homework, Noelle had written an essay on the subject through the lens of her favorite local costumed hero, Spider-Human, speculating on how the masked crimefighter's human biology may play a part in whatever gave them superhuman powers. Most humans couldn't stick to walls or jump that high, but Spider-Human had something else working in their favor. Maybe a form of genetic mutation?

She doodled a little Spider-Human hanging upside-down from a web in the corner of her notebook, tuning out Ms. Alphys' lecture as her mind wandered. Noelle was pretty much Spider-Human's biggest fan. She'd only ever seen the superhero swinging around town from afar - a not uncommon but always exciting sight in NHC - but she wouldn't say no to a chance to examine their, *ahem,* *biology* a bit closer up. Maybe a web-slinging ride through the air with her arms wrapped around their strong shoulders, or a romantic upside-down kiss in the rain, or...

Her train of thought was derailed by her friend Kris leaning over to pass a note to her desk. She startled, glancing at them and then down at the paper. Unfolding it, she saw that it read, *Watch your back today. Susie's on the warpath for whatever reason.*

Ugh. Noelle shot Kris a thankful thumbs-up, but now her mood was soured. Susie Thompson was such a bully, and always picking on her!

It's not like she *minded* exactly, it's not like Susie's attention was the *worst* thing in the world - despite all her impressive and formidable teeth, Susie was more bark than bite - but Noelle did get a little tired of being called a nerd like that was somehow a bad thing! Sure, being both the rich, privileged mayor's daughter and a major science geek made her the odd doe out in her class, and thus a prime target for bullying, but it wasn't as though she was unpopular or a weird little loner. She had friends!

Okay, mostly just one friend, and Kris was...well, they *were* the resident weird little loner. Mainly because they were adopted, and the only human in the whole school - not too surprising since it was a majority-monster neighborhood, prominent superheroic exceptions aside. But they were her friend! And it wasn't a pity friendship or a weird unrequited crush or anything, either. Kris and Noelle had been best friends since her first year of high school. Although she had known Kris's family for a lot longer than that, thanks to Dess's long-standing friendship with their older brother Asriel, it wasn't until she and Kris had become classmates that they'd really started hanging out together. They had gravitated naturally towards one another; turns out being a freshman in a new school is a lot easier when there's someone you already know there.

And yeah, it was a little weird now that Kris's father Asgore was running against her mother in the election, but Asgore had been divorced from Kris's mom for years now. Noelle had never asked what exactly caused the split - it was none of her business, after all. The Dreemurrs and Holidays had been close once, when

Dess and Asriel were younger, but these days as far as the rest of the Dreemurrs were concerned, Asgore was no longer part of the family. Noelle had a few childhood memories of meeting Asgore, and she knew her father had been friends with him, but she wasn't about to let his choices interfere with her friendship with Kris.

She actually had her father to thank for that friendship, as it happened. Had Carol had her druthers, Noelle and Dess would have attended fancy-pants private schools, but Rudy had been adamant that his children should get a more "worldly" public education like he'd enjoyed growing up. So as a result, Noelle had gotten a best friend at EMH and Dess had nearly gotten expelled a couple times. Thanks, dad!

Don't think about dad don't think about dad don't think about -

The bell rang. Finally!

As the students rushed out of the classroom and flooded the hall, Kris sidled up alongside Noelle and nudged her gently with their elbow. "Hey."

"Hi, Kris!" she said brightly. "Thanks for the heads-up on the Susie situation."

"You look tired," they observed. How they could tell this (or even see where they were going) through the long cascade of messy brown hair perpetually covering their eyes was a mystery to her.

"So do you," she noted, though this observation took even fewer detective skills, because Kris was -

"I'm always tired," they said, finishing her thought for her.

Noelle weaved her way through the crowd, heading in the direction of her locker, while Kris stuck close beside her. They always did that, following her around like a puppy, like they were tethered to her side by some invisible string.

"So," she asked, "what's your secret?"

For a moment, Kris's steady shuffling gait hit a snag. They froze and said, "Huh?"

"To surviving school while always tired, I mean."

"Oh." Their shoulders slumped, relaxing. "I sleep in class. No one knows because they can't see my eyes. Hey, can I copy your notes from today?"

Noelle rolled her eyes, but nodded. "Sure, Kris, of course you can." Kris might have had a lazy streak bigger than the stripe on their trademark green-and-yellow sweater, but she wasn't about to let them flunk school just because they had trouble paying attention sometimes. Heck, she'd been pretty close to falling asleep in class this morning herself.

"Thanks," Kris mumbled. They leaned on the row of lockers while Noelle unlocked hers and started swapping out the textbooks in her backpack for the

ones she'd need in her next classes. She had a system for this - it was nice to not have to lug around a super heavy backpack *all* day.

"Are you sleeping again?" Noelle teased. She wouldn't be at all surprised if Kris was capable of sleeping standing up.

They didn't miss a beat. "Uh-huh. Stop talking to me or you'll wake me up."

Noelle chuckled. She still had her head buried in her locker, the door blocking her view to her right, so she didn't notice who else had come up beside her. At least, not until she closed the locker and found Susie looming over her.

The bully was wearing a dark leather jacket that clashed violently with her purple scales, and her face was all teeth, her long snout pulled into a smirk. As always, she was flanked by a couple of her gang of hangers-on: This time it appeared to be Betty "Bratty" Brant and Catty Allen.

"Well well," Susie sneered, "look who it is. The nerd and the freak. Fancy meeting you here."

Kris said nothing, leaving Noelle to blink up at Susie's mean yellow eyes. Such stunningly bright, slit-shaped pupils, brimming with menace and danger...

"Um, w-well," Noelle stammered, "th-this *is* my locker, so it kinda makes sense that I'd be here..."

Susie's eyes narrowed, squinting suspiciously. "So? It's not like I was *looking* for you or something. Not like I'm going *out of my way* to thrash you. You mean nothing to me, got it? You're just...in my way, that's all!"

Noelle blinked slowly. "In your way...to what?"

"Nothing! It's a figure of speech!" Susie's nostrils flared, letting out an actual puff of smoke. "You trying to make fun of me, Holiday?" She looked over her shoulder at Bratty and Catty. "You seeing this? Little Miss Know-It-All thinks she's smarter than me. Maybe I should show her what happens to smartiepants who show off all the time."

"Yeah, teach her a lesson she won't learn in class!" Catty giggled.

Bratty shrugged. "Yeah, like, teach her who's boss and stuff."

Susie turned back to Noelle and grabbed her by the front of her sweater vest, slamming her against the locker. She leaned in close to Noelle's face, all her teeth bared. "You think you're so special just 'cause you've got it all made. Rich family, good grades. It'd be a shame if someone ruined your perfect little life by messing up that cute face." She opened her mouth, letting Noelle stare into that pink maw of sharp teeth.

Noelle's mouth hung open while she tried to remember how to form words. "You think I'm c-cute??"

"No!" Susie roared. "I threaten to bite your face off and *that's* your takeaway? What is wrong with you?!"

A few students glanced over at them in alarm before scurrying away towards the cafeteria, leaving the hall clear. No one dared interfere with Susie.

No one except Kris.

Before Noelle knew what was happening, Kris had their hand on Susie's arm. They didn't do anything, just stood there holding on, but she could tell that their grip was stronger than it looked, because Susie tried to pull away but they held on fast. They didn't even budge, like they were rooted to the floor or something. "Let Noelle down."

"Or - or what, you little weirdo?" Susie challenged, but she looked surprised, hesitant in a way that was rare for her. Her friends hovered on the margins behind them, waiting to see what the ringleader of their gang would do.

"You should think about this," Kris said. Their voice was calm and quiet; they didn't seem scared at all. "Her mother is the Mayor."

"I know that! What about it?"

"And your mother is...?"

"Hey!" Susie snarled. "My mother has nothing to do with anything!"

Kris nodded. "Exactly. Your mom is a nobody. At least, until her kid assaults the mayor's daughter. Do you really think it'll make your life better if *her* mom knows *your* mom's name?"

Susie stared down at them, rage and hesitation warring on her face. And then she let go of Noelle and stepped back as the doe dropped to her hooves.

Noelle brushed herself off and opened her mouth to say something, but Susie's attention was fully on Kris now; she wasn't even looking at Noelle anymore.

"Goddamn freak," Susie muttered, and then she stormed away, Bratty and Catty following in her wake like good little minions.

Noelle let out a long exhale. She hadn't realized she'd been holding her breath, but now that the excitement was over, she felt like her head was spinning. "Phew! Thanks, Kris."

Kris shrugged. "No prob."

"I thought she was going to kick your butt for sure!" Noelle babbled excitedly. "She's twice your size and you *touched her* and she *didn't kill you*! I don't know how you did that but it was so cool! Golly, I thought she was going to kick *my* butt! I don't know what her deal is, I mean she's always picked on me but she's never gotten that... *physical* before..."

"I think she likes you," Kris said.

“Wh-what?! FAHAHAHAHAHA, Kris, *what?! No way! That’s...that’s! Were you not watching just now? She obviously hates me! Does not like me in any way shape or form, obviously. That’s just...um... does it feel hot in here to you?*” She tugged nervously at the collar of her sweater. “I think the AC is broken again hahaha.”

Kris pulled their bangs out of their eyes specifically to give her a judgemental sideways glance. “You like her too.”

“KRIS!! Stop saying stuff like that, you’re being silly! You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Then why is your nose glowing?”

“Is not!” Noelle said petulantly, glancing down at the end of her muzzle to see that it very much was emitting a soft red glow like a Christmas light. An embarrassing symptom of embarrassment that only served to make the embarrassment more embarrassing. Of all the features of her reindeer biology, this was the one she liked the least.

She hid her nose behind her hand and turned to run away. “Thanks for helping me Kris I owe you one but I need to go to class now bye!”

Kris, behind her, shouted, “Ask her out next time! Maybe you’ll get lucky and you can eat each other’s faces!”

Noelle trotted down the hall, cursing everything under her breath. She didn’t have time for...whatever any of that was. Stupid Kris. Stupid Susie. Stupid nose. AAAAAH!

Friday passed without further incident, thank the Angel, and soon enough Saturday dawned. Noelle got up bright and early that morning, still feeling a little underslept (mostly due to nervous excitement this time; she never slept well the night before a big test, and this was no different). Still, she was awake and as ready as she’d ever be to ace her Gastcorp presentation! She had the prototype in her backpack and was *pretty* sure it would actually work this time!

Oh god, it had better work this time.

She got off the train near the Gastcorp building, a massive sleek white skyscraper. It was one of the tallest buildings in the city, which seemed only fitting considering that Gastcorp was one of the biggest corporations in Monstermerica.

Noelle always felt like she was intruding, stepping foot in that building, even as she scanned her intern ID badge to get past security, crossed the busy lobby, and took the elevator up to the laboratory that had been provided for her. This was

where the top scientists in the country developed new medicines and scientific breakthroughs to benefit all monsterkind, and Noelle was...well, she was a teenager. Just a girl with enough family connections and good enough grades to get a spot in a prestigious internship program.

But she was here, and regardless of how she'd gotten here, she was determined to make it count for something. So as she joined the group of her fellow young interns waiting anxiously to present their innovations, she told herself that this was her time to shine, and shine she would. And not in the glowing nose way this time!

The atmosphere in the lab felt a bit like a very professional science fair. The lab was clean and white, filled with cutting-edge equipment, but they wouldn't be making use of it today; they'd brought their own gizmos. There were only about half a dozen other interns, but they all had their inventions lined up for display on a table in the center of the room, ready to be shown off. Noelle took hers out of her backpack and placed it in the spot assigned to her, behind a sign with her name on it.

What she had created looked like a pair of shiny metal wristbands, lined around their circumference with rectangular cartridges. Each band also featured a small nozzle and a pressure plate at the end of a metal strip that extended outward to cover the palm so that the wearer could activate it with a press of their fingers.

The wristbands were only half of the invention, of course. The other half was what was inside the cartridges.

"Woah!" a nasally voice said from behind her. "Cool bracelets!"

Noelle gave a little sigh under her breath and turned around to see Berdly looking at her with a characteristically overconfident expression. He was the only other intern from her school: As the top students in East Monsterhattan High's science courses, the two of them had been recommended for the program by Ms. Alphys, who used to work for Gastcorp before she became a teacher. Which meant that even here, Noelle couldn't get away from Berdly.

Berdly was...well, she supposed he was her friend, but it wasn't the kind of friendship one chose - it was the kind one drew in a random lottery and then had to live with. She was pretty sure he would never have been accepted for the internship if not for all the long hours she'd spent tutoring him for class. She tried not to resent him for it, though, because that would be what her mother called "an uncharitable thought," and those were discouraged (at least in Noelle; Carol herself had plenty of them).

"Hi, Berdly," she said. "They're not bracelets, actually, they're a wearable delivery system for an advanced artificial biosynthetic -"

"Oh, so you just put them on your wrists?" Berdly interrupted, reaching for the device. "How does it work?"

"Don't touch that, it's delicate!" Noelle snapped, batting his hand away.

Berdly looked affronted. "My dear Noelle, I'll have you know that I have the soft and gentle touch of a master craftsman. These are not the hands of some clumsy neanderthal beating rocks with sticks!" He held his winged arm out as if to demonstrate its steadiness. "Why, I can control every centimeter of movement, every fraction of a percent of pressure of every digit to within a hairsbreadth."

"That's great, Berdly. So what did you make for *your* project?"

"Oh, you'll see soon enough!" Berdly said smugly. "I hope you came prepared to be amazed!"

"I'm sure it'll be awesome," Noelle assured him half-heartedly, hoping he wouldn't detect the insincerity in her voice (he usually didn't). They hadn't been allowed to solicit each other's help on the projects, as they were meant to be a showcase of each individual student's knowledge and skills. And without her help, Berdly's track record of success was... well. That would have been another uncharitable thought.

"Oh, oh! Someone's coming!" one of the other students exclaimed, and all eyes turned toward the door. A shadow had appeared behind the frosted glass, hunched over as the person punched in the security passcode, and a moment later, the futuristic door slid open to reveal...

Noelle's jaw dropped. She had been expecting a panel of judges, maybe Ms Alphys or even the enthusiastic human who had given them their orientation tour, but no. The man who stood before them was none other than the founder and CEO of Gastcorp himself, Dr. Norman Gaster.

Her mouth suddenly felt very dry.

Though not as dry as Dr. Gaster's must have been. He looked dry as a bone, literally: He was a tall, slender skeleton monster with a bald white head and dark round eyes. He wore a lab coat - black, rather than the usual white, though this seemed to be purely a fashion choice - over a turtleneck sweater. He carried a clipboard in his hands, and his face wore a smile as he took in their surprised expressions.

"I know," he said mildly, holding up a hand to stave off any comments. "You weren't expecting to see me. You probably thought that such a busy, important man wouldn't have any interest in the modest achievements of mere high schoolers. But that could not be further from the truth." He swept an open hand slowly across the assembled group of students, as if gesturing towards some grand horizon only he could see. "All of you were chosen because you are already in some way remarkable. You represent the future of science, and one day, when I am gone, it may well be you carrying on the work I've begun, the legacy of Gastcorp: To push the boundaries of the imagination for the betterment of monsterkind."

It was all Noelle could do to keep from vibrating in excitement. She wanted to jump up and down and squeal. The smartest monster on the planet was telling her that she had a bright future. That she was important. Her, Noelle Holiday!

“So,” Gaster said, “let’s get right down to it, shall we? I want to see the fruits of all your labor.” He checked his clipboard. “Who do we have first? Looks like... Berdly Cristata?”

Berdly stepped up, shirt pressed and feathers preened, practically glowing with pride. “I just want to say that it’s an honor to meet you, sir, a real pleasure, and thank you for the opportunity. I won’t let you down, I’ve been working day and night on my miraculous invention!”

“The pleasure is all mine, son,” Gaster smiled. “Now why don’t you show us what you’ve been working on?”

“Behold!” Berdly cried, holding up what looked like...a plastic bodysuit? Noelle squinted and looked closer. No, she’d been mistaken, it wasn’t plastic at all, but some kind of rubbery translucent material.

“Hold on, one moment please,” Berdly said, clambering into the strange outfit one leg at a time and struggling to zip up the back. It even had a hood that went over his head. Once covered head to foot in the rubbery material, he turned to address the room. “By combining DNA from the scales of the common chameleon with this suit synthesized from bioluminescent jellyfish skin, I’ve discovered a way to refract light and turn the wearer completely invisible! As you can no doubt tell, I have become undetectable to the naked eye! I call my creation...the Stealth Suit!”

Noelle cleared her throat politely. “Um, Berdly? We can still see you.”

“What?” Berdly squawked. “Preposterous!” He glanced down at his body, which, while obscured somewhat by the shimmery substance, was no more invisible than a man draped in a shower curtain. “The - the lighting is all wrong in this laboratory! It’s these fluorescent lights and - and this pure white room! In an *ordinary* environment, the suit would blend right in with its surroundings, becoming perfectly camouflaged!”

“Well,” Gaster hummed, jotting down a brief note on his clipboard, “perhaps there are some kinks to work out still, but it’s an interesting prototype. What do you foresee the potential applications of this...stealth suit being?”

“Well, um...stealth applications!” a flustered Berdly stammered. “Such as...for spies or... or...”

One of the other students chuckled under his breath, nudging his friend with his elbow. “More like for sneaking into the girls’ locker room.”

“That! Is! Absurd!” Berdly chirped angrily. “Perhaps a cretin like you would abuse this invention for such perverted purposes, but I have only the noblest intentions, I assure you! This is revolutionary technology, you’ll see!”

“Or we won’t see,” the heckling student smirked. “Eventually, maybe.”

Berdly looked hopping mad, a sight made even less intimidating than usual by his ridiculous attire. Noelle was torn between sympathy and the sudden impulse to laugh.

But the argument didn't have the chance to escalate, because Dr. Gaster interjected, "All right, let's focus on the positives in each other's work, please. Young Berdly's invention, once fine-tuned, would indeed be an...innovative application of gene-splicing technology. Now, who's up next? Ah..." He looked directly at Noelle. "None other than the daughter of New Home City's dedicated mayor. I'm sure we're all anticipating great things from you, Noelle Holiday."

Noelle gulped. "I - I hope I won't disappoint, Dr. Gaster, sir!"

She strapped the wristbands to her arms, explaining as she did so, "What you're looking at is a portable, wearable delivery mechanism for a synthetic semi-solid substance of my own design. By replicating the basic genetic structure of a spider's webbing using DNA samples from Gastcorp's laboratory specimens, and then combining it with a powerful adhesive to reinforce it and make it many times sturdier... well, see the results for yourself."

Here it came, the moment of truth. Noelle spoke with confidence, but inside she was terrified that she was about to humiliate herself like Berdly. But there was nothing for it but to try, and hope this worked.

She raised her hand towards the ceiling and pressed down on her palm. Immediately, a line of thin silvery string shot out and hit the ceiling, attaching itself securely to the spot it struck. She then wrapped her hands securely around the strand and began to climb.

Gasps rose from the assembled students as Noelle ascended hand over hand up the fragile-looking silken strand. It seemed reasonable to expect that such a flimsy thing would not support her weight, and yet it held.

"As you can see," Noelle went on, feeling a euphoric rush of genuine confidence, "my hands don't get stuck to it because the material sticks only to the point of contact...at least on this setting. Think of all the people in this city, such as window washers and electricians, who work dangerous jobs high above the ground. A substance such as this, cheaper to manufacture than steel cables but just as strong, and lighter and more portable than rope, could make life safer for anyone who has to spend their days suspended along the side of a skyscraper. And that's not all."

She dropped to the ground again and adjusted a knob on her wristbands. "It has other functions as well. For example, it can be used to excrete a more traditional liquid glue that then hardens after a short time, perfect for plugging gaps in damaged stone or concrete - think of all the times a supervillain has taken chunks out of the city's infrastructure and you'll begin to see the usefulness. And there's also this."

She stretched her arms out and fired. This time, a thin but dense web-like net shot out from each nozzle, expanding to cover a wide area. Once it settled on the floor, Noelle walked over and attempted to lift it up, but it wouldn't budge. "Like the single strand, it attaches itself upon contact. The perfect safety net! I don't have an elevated surface to demonstrate with, but if I did, I promise that I'd be able to walk right across the net without falling through. Heck, it would hold a monster twice my size!"

She glanced around at the mess she'd made of the lab's floor. "Admittedly, there is one small design flaw: Contact with the open air causes the thin strands to slowly degrade, so after about a couple hours it dissolves into nothingness. But I'm confident I can make it last longer with a little more tinkering! And in the meantime, look on the bright side - you don't have to worry about clean-up!"

Gaster looked highly interested, and most of her fellow interns appeared impressed, but Berdly - who by this point had extricated himself from his jellyfish suit - raised his hand. Without waiting for anyone to give him permission to speak, he said, "It's a very clever reproduction, Noelle, but don't you think it's a little...derivative?"

Noelle blinked at him, taken aback. "What do you mean?"

Berdly spread his wings wide in exasperation. "You're slinging webs around like you're Spider-Human! You made a...a *webshooter* that just does whatever Spider-Human can!"

"Well, haha, I mean..." Noelle laughed nervously, "I may have taken a *little* inspiration from them, sure, but -"

"Regardless of the inspiration," Dr. Gaster interrupted, "her 'webshooters' work. No one knows how Spider-Human's web-based powers function, and yet Ms. Holiday here has developed a way to duplicate those powers for anyone to use. That is an impressive, dare I say ingenious, accomplishment."

"Th-thank you!" Noelle said quickly, blushing at the praise. "But j-just to be clear, I didn't do it because I want to be a superhero or anything. I just thought it could have a lot of practical applications."

"I've no doubt it could," Gaster said, "which is a subject I would love to discuss with you further after the presentations. For now, let's see who we have up next..."

The group continued their presentations, but Noelle had to force herself to pay attention. She felt vindicated, her heart buzzing with an uncommon pride. Not only had her invention worked, but Dr. Gaster himself had been impressed by it! Berdly could think whatever he liked; this was the greatest day of her life.

When the remaining students had finished showing their inventions, Gaster gave another speech about the importance of promoting fresh, inquisitive young minds in the sciences. And then they were dismissed, and that was that. Internship completed. Noelle was really going to miss working here - she hoped she could get a job at Gastcorp after graduating, but that span of a few more months felt like it was still a lifetime away.

As she was preparing to leave, though, Gaster stopped her with a skeletal hand on her shoulder. "Ms. Holiday, could I have a quick word with you before you go?"

For a moment, Noelle felt a stomach-clenching flash of anxiety, like she was being summoned to the principal's office. But that was nonsense, just an

automatic response to Gaster's authority. The scientist had been nothing but impressed with her, so surely she wasn't in any trouble now. "Of course, Dr. Gaster. Is it about my, er..."

"Webshooters?" Gaster chuckled. "Your internship may be over, but I would very much like to have you come back here to discuss your ideas for those at a later date. I see a lot of potential in you, Noelle."

"Oh! Th-thanks! That means a lot, coming from someone like you."

"For now, though," Gaster continued, waving off the compliment, "I wanted to extend an invitation. As you may have heard, tomorrow is a big day for this company. We'll be hosting a press conference to formally unveil our R&D department's latest breakthrough, one which should prove groundbreaking for not just Gastcorp but all of monsterkind. Your mother will be in attendance to say a few words, and with your permission, I would like to suggest that she bring you along as well."

"I would love to come!" Noelle said brightly. "Any, um, hints about what to expect from this big announcement?"

Gaster winked knowingly. "Let's just say that I think you'll find it interesting. Especially after today. Perhaps it will spark further inspiration in that gifted mind of yours."

"I-I'm sure it will! And gosh, just being there to watch you and your researchers make history again will be exciting enough on its own! I'll definitely be there! I'll beg my mom on my knees if I have to!"

Gaster laughed. "I'm sure that won't be necessary. The event is open to the public, but I'll put in a good word for you nonetheless. You can even bring a friend, if you wish. Now if you'll excuse me, Noelle, it's been a pleasure but I still have a lot to do to prepare for tomorrow, so you'll forgive me if I don't walk you out. I will, however, keep the security pass in your intern ID badge active until we can arrange something more...permanent."

With that, he swept out of the room, leaving Noelle starstruck and reeling from the implications of that final word. Maybe she wouldn't have to wait until after high school to get a job here! It sure sounded like Dr. Gaster was talent-scouting her. She'd suspected that was the whole point of the internship - not just to help young would-be scientists hone their skills, but to scoop up the best and brightest for Gastcorp. But she'd never imagined that would mean her!

She was practically skipping down the street after leaving the building, and she spent the train ride home daydreaming about an implausible (but not impossible!) future working directly under Dr. Gaster's mentorship, learning how to be a great inventor like him. Making her father proud, wherever he was now.

As she stared idly out the train window, lost in her thoughts, her attention was caught by a sudden motion, high up among the glistening skyscrapers of downtown Monsterhattan. A blur of blue swung by on a long arc before doing a

mid-air flip, diving headfirst several stories, and then arcing back upwards again and disappearing from sight behind a building.

Spider-Human!

Noelle sat up straight, suddenly alert. Sure, she'd spotted the superhero a few times before, and they were on the news all the time, but to see them now, on this of all days...it felt like a sign.

She curled her middle two fingers and pressed them against her palm, making the slightly awkward gesture that she'd used to activate her 'webshooters' (because sure, she might as well call them that - it's not like she had a better name). *Must be nice to swing through the sky like that*, she thought. *I bet from up there, all your problems and anxieties and responsibilities feel as tiny as toy cars. Nothing but the freedom to go where you like and the power to save everyone who needs you.*

If only she'd had the power to do that for her father...

But then she snorted under her breath and shook the daydream from her head, smiling sadly at her foolish fantasy. She was no superhero. She was just Noelle. And that was enough.

Because for the first day in a long time, 'just Noelle' felt like a pretty okay thing to be.

Chapter 2: M.E.C.C.A.

By the time Noelle got home, she felt like she could practically fly. She kept repeating her conversation with Dr. Gaster over and over in her head, the memory lingering on that hint of a permanent position within the company. Not even out of high school yet and already she was lining up what she imagined would be a prestigious and well-paying job. She was the *best* at this networking thing. Her mom was going to be so proud!

She indulged herself in a jubilant skip down the long driveway, though she reverted to her normal walk as she drew nearer to Holiday Manor. She didn't want the security guards to see her acting funny - not that they were paid to care how she acted, provided she was safe. After what had happened to her father, the presence of armed guards on the property should have made her feel safer, but instead it just made the place feel a little more like a fortress and a little less like her home.

They said home was where the heart is, and her dad had always been the heart of the family.

Noelle sighed as she trudged up to the front door, her good mood dampened. The guards outside - a short human and a stern-looking female panther in a suit - gave her a nod of acknowledgement.

"Welcome home, Ms. Holiday," the human said in a polite, formal tone. "I hope you had a good day." Their pink cheeks were flushed from standing out in the brisk late October air, and they wore a wide smile on their face. They were barely any taller than Kris; it was hard to think such a small human would be much of a deterrent to intruders, but Noelle knew from her studies about the long-ago Monster-Human War that humans could be deceptively powerful - especially against monsters and their weaker, magic-based physiology.

She gave the guard a little wave hello and a "It was good, thank you." She didn't feel like making small talk beyond the basic niceties, though, so she quickly moved past them into the house, wiping her hooves on the welcome mat and shutting the heavy oak door behind her.

"Hey, Mom," she called. "I'm home!" She tried to summon back some of her earlier optimism. "And I have big news!"

Her mother didn't answer, but after pausing for a moment, Noelle heard Carol's voice drifting down the hall, coming from the direction of her study. It sounded like she was on the phone - her voice had that extra-brisk tone to it, all business. Her 'Mayor voice,' Noelle called it, though the difference between that and her regular speaking voice would have been difficult to detect for anyone who didn't know her well. Lately she was in Mayor mode a lot more often than Mom mode.

Leaving her backpack hung up in the foyer, Noelle went down the hall to see what her mother was up to.

The study was large and lavishly furnished, from the polished desk to the bookcases full of volumes on art, law, history and politics. Noelle couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her mother actually reading any of those books; they seemingly only existed to look sophisticated and make more work for the maid when doing the rounds of dusting. A TV was mounted on the wall above a fireplace that it wasn't quite cold enough yet to use, even though it had a little stack of logs neatly piled next to it in anticipation of colder months to come. On the opposite side of the room, Mayor Holiday sat at her desk, looking poised and professional as ever with her glasses perched on her muzzle. Even when she was working from home she still wore a suit.

Carol held up a finger when she saw her daughter enter the room, signaling for Noelle to wait. She was talking intently into her cell phone. "Yes, Chief Undyne, I'm aware of the situation. I have every confidence that NHPD can handle this latest... incident. Angel knows you've had plenty of practice in the last couple years."

She leveled an irritated glare at the TV, and it was then that Noelle followed her mother's gaze and finally noticed what was playing across the screen: A live breaking news report from Monster News Network. Aerial helicopter footage showed a rooftop battle between a familiar, dramatic humanoid figure clad head to toe in a blue costume with a red heart on the center of their chest, and a large tarantula monster carrying bags of cash in several of its arms.

The chyron scrolling along the bottom of the screen read: BATTLE OF THE ARACHNIDS: SPIDER-HUMAN IMPEDES ATTEMPTED BANK ROBBERY BY THE CRIMINAL KNOWN AS TERRORANTULA.

Noelle stared at the TV, rooted to the spot by the thrill of secondhand adrenaline as she watched the lightning-fast fight play out. This must be where Spider-Human was headed when she'd spotted them from the train earlier! And now they were putting their life on the line for the good of the city once again, like the brave hero that they were.

She watched as the masked human leapt through the air, jumping over swipes of Terrorantula's hairy arms and spitting blasts of webbing into several of his eyes, impeding the criminal's vision. Just when it seemed like Spider-Human had him on the ropes though, Terrorantula blindly lashed out and hit Spider-Human with one arm, sending them crashing into a nearby chimney. He then leapt forward, pouncing directly on top of the stunned hero and appearing to sink his fangs into their side.

"No!" Noelle shrieked, clasping her hands over her mouth.

Carol shot her an exasperated glance. "No, no, everything's fine here. My daughter's just a bit... excited watching this news coverage. I'll continue to monitor the situation from here. And Undyne? If your officers can bring in those web-slinging menaces, don't hesitate to do so. As far as I'm concerned, this city would be better off with both of them behind bars." She hung up the phone and set it down on her desk, and then finally turned to Noelle. "What is that look for?"

“Mom!” Noelle blurted out. “Spider-Human is fighting for their life out there to protect us, and you want them arrested? They’re not the bad guy here!”

Carol sighed. “Noelle, we’ve been over this. That...person, whoever they are, is an illegal vigilante. Trying to take the law into your own hands doesn’t make anyone safer, it just leads to dangerous incidents like this.”

She gestured at the television, where Spider-Human was forcing Terrorantula off them with a super-powered kick, flipping the villain onto his back. While the monster flailed his eight limbs in the air, Spider-Human hastily spun a net of webbing over him until he was hopelessly tangled. Then they slumped against the broken chimney, clutching their side; red blood was briefly visible through the torn fabric, even from the helicopter’s aerial viewpoint, before they covered the wound with a bandage of webbing.

“But Mom, look!” Noelle said passionately. “They’re hurt! That bank robber could have killed them!”

“Then I’m sure they’ll receive perfectly good medical care while in police custody,” Carol began to say. “Oh, wait, looks like they’ve swung away again.” She took off her glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose. “If they weren’t so *mobile*... well, it’s only a matter of time until they slip up and get caught.”

Don’t count on it, Noelle thought bitterly.

On the TV screen, the news had moved on from the live footage now that the action was over. The newscaster, a well-groomed lioness, was saying, “Our other top crime story today: Diamond District Jewelers on W 47th is the latest in a string of Monsterhatten jewelry stores that have been robbed in recent weeks. NHPD has promised that an investigation is ongoing, but so far there are no suspects. Armchair detectives on popular website nhctruecrime.com, however, have noted on the site’s forums that all of the recently victimized businesses were owned by humans, sparking speculation as to whether the mob boss known as the ‘Kingpin of Crime’ is behind the robberies. Little is known about the mysterious self-styled Kingpin, but NHPD raids in recent months have led to the arrests of several low-level members of the wide-ranging criminal organization engaged in weapons dealing and protection rackets, and police interrogations have reportedly revealed a strain of anti-human sentiment among the all-monster mobsters’ ranks.”

Carol reached for the remote and turned the television off. “You see what I have to deal with? Criminals in this city are getting more emboldened by the day. We are balanced on a precipice of lawlessness!”

“I bet Spider-Human could stop those robberies,” Noelle muttered, before her mother could launch into a full-on rehash of her campaign speeches.

Carol gave her an especially stern look. “That’s enough about this ‘superhero’ nonsense, Noelle. I know you’re a ‘fan’ or whatever, but as your mother, my concern is your safety, and you’ll be safer if you stay far away from that sort of thing. If you ever find yourself in the vicinity of one of these costumed criminals,

even someone you think is one of the so-called 'good guys,' you run the other way, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Noelle said meekly, even though she knew full well that if she ever met Spider-Human in person, *away* is not the direction she would be running.

"On a brighter note," Carol said, turning her attention to her laptop, "judging from the email I received a short while ago from Norman Gaster, I take it your presentation went well. What was it, the...adhesive?"

"Y-yeah!" Noelle said. She had mentioned the adhesive but neglected to explain its functional similarities to Spider-Human's webbing, figuring that her mother would not approve. "It was so amazing getting to meet him! And I think he was really impressed with my work."

Carol raised an eyebrow. "You *think* he was impressed, or he was impressed, which is it?"

Noelle swallowed and said, more confidently, "He was impressed. He wants to meet with me about it again. And he invited me to the press conference tomorrow. I was hoping...we could go together?"

Carol nodded. "Yes, he said as much in the email. As the mayor, it's an obligation - it behooves me to show support for a new business venture by one of the city's biggest companies. But for you, this is obviously an opportunity you shouldn't pass up. This is your chance to get your hoof in the door of the adult world, Noelle. So yes, you will be there. Wear something nice for the cameras - it's a press conference, not a fundraiser, but even so, a Holiday should always look her best."

"O-of course!" Noelle said happily. "Thank you, Mom! I can hardly wait to find out what Dr. Gaster is unveiling. Aaaa, it's so exciting!"

Carol didn't look up from her computer, her fingers clacking away at the keyboard. "I'm not surprised he sees potential in you - he's supposed to be smart, after all. And he donated quite a bit to my campaign, so clearly the man knows where and on whom to place his bets." She glanced at Noelle. "But don't let him take advantage of you. Don't agree to anything regarding your invention or sign any documents without having our people look over them first to make sure everything's on the up and up - you may be my daughter, but you're still only a child, you know, and the corporate world can be a cutthroat place."

"I'll be smart, Mom, I promise," Noelle said. "Aren't I always?"

Carol gave a noncommittal hum in response. "Why don't you go see how Rosalynn is doing in the kitchen, ask her how long it'll be until dinner is served?"

"Sure, okay," Noelle said. She was still getting used to having a cook. Nothing could replace her father's cooking, but if meals had been left to Carol, they

would have been dining on frozen pizza most nights. “Is Dess home? It’d be nice if she joined us for dinner sometime...”

“That *would* be nice,” Carol said dryly, peering over the tops of her glasses. “But your sister has made it very clear that family is not her priority.” Under her breath, she muttered, “Angel knows what is.”

As it happened, Dess did not join them for dinner. Noelle didn’t see her sister until the next day, when Dess stumbled down the stairs around noon, yawning. She was dressed in sweatpants and a ratty old black tank top that matched her messy hair, and her eyes had taken on a raccoon-like quality, dark circles in her brown fur that seemed deeper than sleep deprivation alone ought to cause.

“Good morn- um, afternoon!” Noelle said cheerfully. It was a slightly forced cheer, because these days Dess was like a stormcloud prowling the house looking for something to rain on, and somebody had to be the ray of sunshine in their family’s shattered sky. “When did you get home?”

“Mornin’, ‘elle,” Dess replied flatly, not bothering to answer the question or correct herself on the time of day.

Noelle was sitting at the kitchen table, doing homework, her textbooks and quiz notes spread out in front of her. It was Sunday, which meant she’d gotten to sleep in a little, but Dess clearly still held the record for that in their family. Noelle hadn’t even heard her come home the night before, even though Dess’s room was just across the hall from hers.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked.

“Like the dead,” Dess muttered. She sounded exhausted, like she’d hardly slept at all.

The older doe opened the fridge, grabbed a carton of milk, and took a swig straight from the container. Then she poured herself a bowl of Honey Monster-Os, sat down across the table from Noelle, and began spooning the dry cereal into her mouth. It crunched loudly as she chewed it. “Whatcha working on?”

“Um, just some homework.”

Dess rolled her eyes. “No shit. I mean like, what kind?”

Noelle glanced down at her page full of completed equations. “Calculus.”

“Ugh, math.” Dess recoiled like she was deathly allergic to the stuff. “I don’t envy you. If I never have to solve anything for X again, it’ll be too soon.”

“I hate to break it to you, but there are math classes in college, too.”

Dess began to chew her dry cereal more forcefully. *Crunch, crunch, crunch.* “Right. That. I’m thinking maybe I’ll just skip all that. It sounds like more trouble than it’s worth.”

Noelle winced, looking over her shoulder like she expected Carol to be hovering in the doorway. “Don’t let Mom hear you say that. Unless you’re *trying* to start another fight about your future.”

“What do you care, Noelle?” Dess grumped. “If I want to drop out before I even get started, it’s no velvet off your antlers. You’ve got your own life to live, and I’m making you look better by comparison, like the generous big sis that I am.”

Noelle snapped her textbook shut, a familiar irritation taking hold of her, too strong to ignore any longer. “*Hey.* I don’t know what’s been going on with you lately, Dess, but don’t talk like I don’t care, because I do! Life’s not a competition, you know. It doesn’t bring me any pleasure to see you struggling. Things are going really well for me actually, thanks for asking, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want the same for you! Not...” She waved her hand in Dess’s general direction. “Whatever this is! Staying out all night, turning up the next day hungover... Some days you don’t even come home at all! And now it’s, what, talking about not going to college? What could possibly be more important than that?”

Dess stared at her, looking for a moment like the figurative deer in headlights. Though when she spoke, all she said was, “Wait, you think I’m hungover right now?”

Noelle threw her arms up in frustration. “How should I know?? I don’t drink!”

“Maybe you should,” Dess said coolly. “Or at least smoke some pot or something to help you chill the hell out.” She returned to chewing with her mouth open. “For the record, if I was hungover there would be 100% more wincing in pain and asking you to turn down the volume. You could at least let me finish my breakfast before reading me the riot act. That’s Mom’s job.”

“Well, Mom’s not here,” Noelle said, gathering up her things and stuffing them all haphazardly into her backpack. “And half the time you’re not here anymore either. So maybe I should just follow your example and leave you alone instead of, Angel forbid, *actually talking about it.*”

She was halfway out the door when she heard Dess say, “You’re right.”

Noelle paused. Turned on her heel. Locked eyes with her sister. “I am?”

But there was no remorse in Dess’s gaze, just a hardness that Noelle wasn’t used to seeing there. A forceful, unhappy look somewhere between resignation and anger. “Yeah. You *don’t* know what’s going on with me, and trust me, sis, you don’t *want* to know. So stay out of my business and I’ll stay out of yours.”

Noelle felt like she’d just been slapped across the face. Angel knew this wasn’t the first time she had fought with Dess, nor the first time her sister’s moodiness had driven her crazy. But the thing was, Dess hadn’t always been this way.

Rebellious, strong willed, fiercely independent...Dess had been all those things since before even hitting puberty, but she used to be *fun*. They used to get along, despite all their differences, and Noelle never used to doubt that Dess loved her and would always be there to protect her.

But Dess hadn't been much of a sister lately. It was like she didn't care about being part of the family anymore. Even a broken family was supposed to come first, right? But Noelle felt like a distant second in Dess's list of priorities now, and she couldn't fathom what had replaced her. She just wanted to know what was so important that it mattered more to Dess than she did.

She could have stayed, pressed Dess harder, been honest about her feelings in the hopes that they would finally have a breakthrough and go back to something closer to normal between them. But Noelle didn't have the energy to put it all into words at that moment. Not when the only words that sprang to mind were the ones that actually left her lips: "W-well screw you too then, Dess! You want to push everyone away? Then fine, have it your way!"

She stomped down the hall and out the front door, resisting the urge to slam it on her way out. Dess didn't try to stop her.

Even as she walked down the driveway towards the street, Noelle began to feel bad about losing her cool. Part of her wanted to turn right back around and go apologize, but a bigger part of her was too prideful to take it back; at least not right away. She loved Dess, but her sister was so infuriating sometimes! If anything, Dess should be apologizing to *her*.

So instead, she did what she always did when she was upset: she called Kris.

They answered with a raised voice and a horrible background noise like wind whipping across the receiver. "Hey, Noelle! What's going on?"

She put a finger to her other ear to try and focus her hearing enough to catch the words. "Kris, where are you? I can barely hear you! Is this a bad time?"

"No, it's fine!" Kris shouted. "Just, uh...driving with the window open!"

Noelle frowned. "Since when do you drive? If you're driving then you really shouldn't have answered the phone, Kris. I can call you back."

"Wait, did I say driving? I meant, um, jogging!"

"Also very unlike you." She shook her head, deciding that she didn't really need to know. "Look, it doesn't matter. I just had a fight with Dess and...I don't know, I could just really use a friend right now. Can I come over? When will you be home?"

"I can be there in, let's see, 20 minutes if traffic's not too bad." They ended that sentence with a little laugh, though Noelle had no idea what was so funny. Kris often seemed to have their own private jokes, and she'd long ago given up on trying to understand them.

"Thanks, Kris," she said. "I'll see you soon then."

"Gotta run!" Kris shouted on the other end of the call. "I mean keep running! Because I'm jogging! See you soooooon!"

Noelle put away her phone and took a deep breath. Kris's easy-going personality always had a way of cheering her up. Things would be okay. She'd take the train to Queens, hang out with them for the afternoon, then head back in time for the Gastcorp press conference. There was no reason this couldn't still be a good day.

It took a while to get to Kris's house - the train across the East River was the most efficient way to get there, but that didn't make it fast. But eventually she made it to the quaint little two-story house where the Dreemurr family lived - or at least, Kris and their mother, Toriel. Their brother Asriel had an apartment near his campus.

The Dreemurrs had downsized since she'd first met them. Noelle knew that money was tight for a divorced school principal and single mother. It made her feel hyper-conscious of her own family's wealth, but Kris never made a big deal out of it. That was part of why Noelle liked them; they saw past the 'rich' in 'rich girl.'

Though as she approached the house, she noticed something odd: An expensive-looking, spotless white car was parked in the driveway in front of Toriel's more scuffed-up, 20-year-old vehicle.

She knocked on the door, and Kris answered it immediately, looking up at her from under their mess of hair. "Hey, there she is! What took you so long, slowpoke?"

"It's not my fault!" Noelle huffed. "You know how the trains are, you must take them all the time to get to school."

"Yes," Kris said, nodding repeatedly. "That is a thing that I do. If only there was a faster way to get around town. Anyways, before you come in, I should warn you: Dad's here."

Noelle blinked. "Asgore?" That explained the fancy car. "I thought he never came around here anymore."

"I was as surprised as you are," Kris said darkly. "He still insists on stopping by for dinner like once a month to see me and Azzy, but today's visit was

unplanned.” They held open the door and stepped aside so she could enter.

As soon as Noelle walked inside, her eyes fell on Asgore’s massive frame in the kitchen. He had his back to her, hunched over the kitchen table talking to Toriel, but she would have known his distinctive mane of golden hair and large, curved horns anywhere. She hadn’t seen him since her father died, aside from in his campaign ads on TV. He hadn’t even attended the funeral. Maybe the grief had still been too recent a wound for him to face at the time. He and her dad had always been best friends.

When she’d been younger, he and Toriel would have dinner at her home often. Back then he had been the city’s police chief, and Noelle had always found Asgore to be a gentle but intimidating presence, a man of quiet dignity and confidence. He was so unlike her own father, who had always been laidback and quick to laugh, a goofball with a penchant for charming everyone he met. Asgore was prouder and more restrained, by comparison, but the two men had gotten along surprisingly well despite their contrasting personalities.

Perhaps it was no surprise that he was currently butting political heads with her mother, though. Asgore had always been more of a conservative to Carol’s moderate, and unlike her husband, Carol had always treated him with a cool, polished veneer of politeness. Noelle recalled occasional dinner-table arguments that had sometimes sprung up between them after a few glasses of wine, before being defused by their spouses. She’d been too young to pay much attention to political disagreements at the time, but the memories had stuck with her. She recalled something about humans and the war; all that was decades ago, but Asgore used to speak of it as though he had been there. His species of monster was long-lived and aged slowly.

She was reminded of those arguments now, because Asgore and Toriel were clearly locked in a disagreement of their own, one that even her knock on the door hadn’t been enough to interrupt. Nor was she much inclined to interrupt them now.

“I’m only trying to help, Tori,” Asgore was saying, his voice low and gravelly. “I know how stubborn you can be, but anyone can see that you’re struggling.”

Asgore’s back blocked her view of Toriel, but the Dreemurr matriarch’s retort was icier than Noelle had ever heard her voice. “We are doing just fine on our own, Asgore. I have made it perfectly clear over the years that I do not want your money, and that has not changed. Besides, I am certain you have your own financial demands at the moment, what with having a campaign to fund. You will need a lot of money to catch up to Carol Holiday’s spending advantage. One wonders how even a successful businessman like you can hope to compete.”

Asgore’s hand clenched around the back of a chair. “My grassroots campaign is funded by small dollar donations from voters.” They sounded like words that he’d had a lot of practice saying. “Not that that’s at all relevant.”

“I think it is,” Toriel sniffed. “You are a few years too late to play the family man, so instead you seek to give the appearance of selflessly supporting the wife

and child you left behind. But Kris and I are not your political props, Asgore, and we will not be indebted to you.”

“Left behind?” Asgore echoed angrily. “I’m not the one who filed for divorce. And this isn’t about debts, Angel damn it. You know you can’t afford to put Kris through college on your salary. They deserve the same chance at success that Asriel got, with or without a scholarship.”

Next to Noelle, Kris loudly and pointedly cleared their throat. “Company’s here, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

That was enough to get Asgore and Toriel to break off their argument. Asgore finally turned to look at them. He was wearing a crisp white button-down over the bulge of his belly with a small golden flower tucked into the front pocket, along with a somewhat sheepish look on his bearded face when he saw Noelle standing there looking uncomfortable. “Ah, Noelle. How rude of me. I apologize.”

Noelle swallowed and gave him a polite smile. “It - it’s okay, Mr. Dreemurr.”

“Please, Noelle, you’ve known me since you were a fawn. Call me Asgore.” He came closer, looking down at her. There was a sad look in his eyes. “It has been...some time since I last saw you, though. I’m pleased to see you looking well.”

“Um, thanks.” Noelle didn’t really know what to say. She hadn’t come here expecting to have to make small talk with her best friend’s estranged father, and now she just felt like she was intruding. “You, uh, seem to be doing well too? Going into politics and everything.” She laughed awkwardly.

Asgore’s posture tensed a little; he held himself stiffly with his hands clasped in front of him. “Noelle, I know things between our families are...strained at the moment, but believe me when I tell you that I bear you and your mother no ill will. I am running against Carol purely out of a sense of civic duty, not some personal grudge. I don’t want you to think that I blame her for what happened to your father. Indeed, I...” He swallowed roughly, a genuine sadness threatening to overtake his confident voice. “I never got the chance to express to you how deeply sorry I am about Rudy. I wish every day that it could have been avoided somehow.”

“Oh,” Noelle said in a small voice. The living room suddenly seemed oppressively warm, and she felt a bit lightheaded. She would have sat down on the Dreemurr’s couch if she didn’t want to excuse herself from this social situation as soon as possible. “That’s very nice of you to say, Mr. Dreemurr, considering it wasn’t at all your fault.”

“Of course not,” Asgore said. “But your father... He was a good man. A better one than me. I like to think his friendship kept me honest.”

From the kitchen table behind him, Toriel gave an audible and derisive snort.

“Yeah, thanks Dad, that’s really sweet,” Kris mercifully interjected, taking Noelle’s hand and dragging her towards the stairs. “But I think Noelle had something she wanted to talk to me about so we’ll let you and Mom argue about my future in peace while we hang out upstairs.”

“Oh. All right. It was good to see you both!” Asgore called after them, but Kris and Noelle were already halfway up the stairs. They looked over their shoulder at her upon reaching the top, and she mouthed a quiet thank you.

That was when she noticed that they were breathing heavily, wincing a little and pressing a hand to their ribs as they fumbled to open their bedroom door.

“You feeling okay, Kris?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” Kris said, but they said it through gritted teeth as they pushed open the door.

The room was sparsely furnished, looking a little bare since Asriel had moved most of his stuff out of their shared bedroom. Kris’s side of the room was a mess of clothes and books strewn across the floor, but they had kept that mess contained to their half, leaving their brother’s side untouched and gathering dust. Kris immediately went to sit down on their bed, and Noelle noticed their hand unconsciously moving to touch their ribs again.

“You don’t look fine,” Noelle pressed, sitting down next to them. “You look hurt. What happened, did you fall out of a tree again?”

Kris looked up at her and rolled their eyes, or at least the one eye she could see through their hair. “That was one time, and I was a kid. I’ll have you know I’m an excellent climber.”

“Then what was it, Kris?” she said patiently.

Kris sighed. “Okay, okay. I know you’re never gonna let it go now. Just, like, don’t freak out, okay? And don’t tell anyone.” They lifted the hem of their sweater slightly, and Noelle had to stifle a gasp. A bandage was wrapped around the circumference of their waist, and poking out from under it she could see deep purple and yellow bruises along their stomach and rib cage, like a colorful bed of flowers in bloom.

“Kris!” she exclaimed. “What happened?!”

“Shhh!” Kris hissed at her. “Keep it down. I don’t want my mom to find out.” They let their sweater drop back over their injuries and looked down at their lap. “It was Susie. She caught up with me after school got out on Friday and...well.”

“This is really serious!” Noelle stood up and began to pace the length of their room. “You *need* to tell your mom. She’s the principal, she needs to know if one of her students is...is beating you up after class!”

“No no no, it’s fine!” Kris insisted, jumping up off the bed with a wince. “It’s not that bad. I don’t want Susie to get in trouble or anything.”

Noelle stared at them incredulously. "How can you say that after what she did to you?"

"Seriously, Noelle, it's okay. It's just a few bruises. I heal fast." They looked stressed, like they were regretting telling her - but how else was she supposed to react? "Please, don't tell anyone."

Noelle hesitated. She wanted to protect her best friend, but she also didn't want to go against their wishes. If Kris didn't want her help, maybe she should just trust them to look after themselves. But clearly that wasn't working out very well for them so far.

Then again, maybe there was another way to handle this without getting the adults involved. Maybe if she talked to Susie, made some kind of a deal. Noelle didn't even mind if Susie roughed her up, so long as she left Kris alone. Maybe if she stopped hiding behind Kris, Susie would focus more on her than on her friend...

"Okay," she said with a sigh. "I don't understand you right now, but I guess that's kinda normal for you. So I won't tell anyone, if that's what you want. But Kris..." She put her hands on their upper arms and looked intently into their eyes; Kris didn't usually like to be touched, even by her, but this was important. "If she hurts you again, you need to...tell me..." She gave their arms a squeeze, staring at their shoulders under their baggy sweater. "That's...firm. Have you been, um, working out?"

Kris yanked away from her grip. "I think I heard Dad leaving," they said, a little too loudly. "Let's have lunch."

"Um, oh...okay!" Noelle said, but they were already heading out the door and back downstairs. "Lead the way..."

What's gotten into them?

Toriel looked up as Noelle and Kris came back downstairs; Asgore was nowhere to be seen. "Hello, Noelle," she said with a sigh. "I am sorry you had to see that earlier. Kris mentioned you would be stopping by, but unfortunately my ex-husband has poor timing and worse tact."

"It's okay, Ms. Dre - I mean, Toriel." Noelle always had to mentally shift gears when interacting with Toriel outside of school. "Oh, before I forget, I wanted to ask you if I can borrow Kris for a bit this evening."

Kris, who had their head buried in the fridge, looked over their shoulder curiously. "Borrow me for what?"

"Gastcorp is doing some big press conference unveiling of a new invention tonight," Noelle explained, "and Dr. Gaster himself invited me to attend!" She held up a hand to stave Kris off before they could say no, her voice speeding up a bit. "And look, I know, it's geeky science stuff and you're not a nerd like I am, but Gaster said I could bring a friend if I wanted and my mom thinks this could be a really important opportunity for my future or something and I'm kind of

nervous about it, haha, so I think I would feel a lot less anxious if you were there for, I don't know, moral support I guess?"

Kris looked a bit uncertain. "Uh, wow, yeah. I haven't been to Gastcorp since that field trip in our second year."

"I remember that," Noelle said. "Didn't you get a stomach bug or something during the presentation on radioisotope power systems and almost throw up? I just remember you started feeling ill and left in a hurry halfway through."

Kris shot a nervous glance at their mother before saying, "Truth be told, I just wanted an excuse to bail. That presentation was super boring."

Toriel gave them a stern look over the top of her glasses. "Science is not 'boring,' Kris. It is a fascinating field of study, as I am sure Noelle could tell you."

"Well, all the more reason to come with me tonight and give Gastcorp a second chance!" Noelle reasoned. "Since I guess this means you're *not* actually allergic to science, fahaha."

"Nah, just math."

Toriel smiled. "I for one think it is a marvelous idea, Noelle! Gastcorp is such an extraordinary company, always making the most amazing scientific advances. I cannot tell you how proud I was when you got an internship there. Kris has not followed in your STEM footsteps, but who knows?" She gave Kris an encouraging look and a smile that left little room for argument. "Perhaps they will find it educational."

"Okay, fine," Kris relented. "I'll tag along. But I should really be getting extra credit in science class for this."

Toriel hummed thoughtfully to herself. "Maybe I should see if another field trip could be arranged soon..."

"Great idea," Kris said, without much enthusiasm. "In the meantime, let's eat. I'm starving."

"Got any dessert?" Noelle asked brightly.

"What kind of a household do you think this is, Noelle?"

"So you're saying there's pie?"

"Got it in one. Gosh, it's almost like you've been here before."

They assembled a meal and ate together around the table. No one mentioned Asgore, and true to her word, Noelle avoided mentioning Susie, even though she could see the effort Kris was putting into hiding their injuries from Toriel. Kris spent most of the meal being weirdly quiet - though, perhaps because they were almost always weird and quiet, their mother didn't comment on it. She was too busy asking Noelle questions about the Gastcorp internship.

Noelle said her goodbyes after eating, because she wanted to leave herself enough time to go home and change before the Gastcorp event. Kris assured her that they would take a later train and catch up with her there.

It wasn't until she was halfway home that she remembered her original reason for going over to Kris's house in the first place. Between the awkward interaction with Asgore and her concern for her friend's well-being, her fight with Dess had been completely driven from her mind.

That was the upside. The downside was, now she had a new thing to worry about. She couldn't stand by and let Kris keep getting hurt. Something had to be done about Susie...

Noelle hovered next to her mother at Gastcorp, watching the big room fill up. It was mostly journalists, aside from a handful of special guests: business leaders, wealthy donors, local politicians and the like. She felt self-conscious and a little overdressed, wearing a dress made from shimmery green velvet that contrasted nicely with her light brown fur. She'd even put on little holly-shaped earrings and candy cane-red lipstick.

No one was paying much attention to her, though, aside from the handful of colleagues her mother introduced her to. She played her role of being pretty and polite, but her attention was split. For one thing, Kris was late, so she'd been keeping one eye out for them since arriving. And there was also an excitement in the air that had nothing to do with shaking hands and making small talk over cocktails (which Noelle wasn't allowed to drink anyways) and hors d'oeuvres (which were pretty tasty for something so unpronounceable).

No, her focus was on the same thing that kept drawing everyone else's eye: The enormous object at the center of the high-ceilinged laboratory, covered in a tarp that revealed a shape with rounded edges like a cylinder, but not much else. This, it seemed, was the focus of tonight's announcement, the reason why this press conference was being held here, in the sprawling R&D lab in the heart of the building. Most of the equipment had been roped off, with security guards keeping a close eye on the guests to ensure no one touched anything they weren't supposed to, but a space had been cleared for the press pool, and a small podium with a microphone had been set up for the speakers.

And behind the podium, looming above it all, that vast, unseen machine.

Finally, after what seemed like an interminable amount of waiting, Dr. Gaster entered, smiling for the cameras and shaking hands as he moved through the crowd. He had swapped his black lab coat for a similarly colored suit jacket, though he was still wearing a turtleneck under it.

While the Doctor made his way across the room, Noelle channeled her excitement into shooting off a quick text to Kris: I can't BELIEVE you're about to miss your chance to meet Dr. Gaster!!

When he got to Noelle and her mother, Gaster paused to give Carol a firm handshake. "Madame Mayor," he greeted her. "Always a pleasure. Thank you for being here today."

"Of course, Norman," Carol said with a polite smile. "This is a big day for you."

"For all of us, Carol, for all of us." He turned to Noelle. "And here's the young genius of the family. You look lovely, Noelle. I hope you'll enjoy the presentation."

"It's a little less nerve-wracking than giving my own presentation," Noelle laughed, "but I'm still very excited!"

"I'll try not to disappoint you," Gaster smiled. He nodded to her mother. "Now, I believe we've left all these people waiting long enough. I'll let you do the honors first."

Carol straightened her already immaculate suit. "Take notes, Noelle. It may be you up there addressing a crowd one day."

"Um, good luck!" Noelle said. "Break a leg?" she added, and then winced. What was she saying? This wasn't the theater, this was just public speaking. Though both seemed equally scary to her. Despite what her mother may say, Noelle knew she wasn't the sort of person to seek a spotlight.

Carol, on the other hand, seemed in her element as she stepped up to the podium, flanked by Dr. Gaster. The crowd's murmur of voices began to die down as she prepared to speak.

It was just then that Noelle felt someone nudge her side. She looked down to see that Kris had materialized beside her, dressed incongruously for an event like this in the same baggy striped sweater and jeans that they'd been wearing that afternoon.

"Oh good," Kris deadpanned, "I'm just in time for the most important part: Your mom."

"What took you so long?" Noelle whispered under her breath. "I thought you were going to miss the whole thing!"

"Sorry," Kris whispered back. "I got a bit sidetracked on the way here."

"How do you get *sidetracked* taking the train?"

"Oh, you know," Kris said vaguely. "The side quests. It's always something."

They were saved from having to explain further by the start of her mother's speech. Carol talked a little about the importance of Gastcorp's contributions to the city: the technological innovations, the jobs created, that sort of thing.

Though with Dr. Gaster's considerable campaign donations and the fact that it was an election year, her speech soon morphed subtly into a variation on the same stump speech that Noelle had heard enough times to grow tired of. It seemed that aside from law and order and anti-vigilantism, supporting business and industry was going to be a major plank of her mother's platform. Whatever. Noelle couldn't help but tune it all out a bit - she didn't care about profit margins or economic impacts, she was here for the love of science.

She perked up when it was Dr. Gaster's turn to speak. Finally, the main event. Her gaze drifted past the podium to the covered machine behind him, and a thrill of anticipation shot through her, like a kid waiting to open her Christmas presents. Whatever this was, it was bound to be something good.

"My friends," Dr. Gaster said warmly. "Ladies and gentleman of the press. Thank you all for coming to bear witness to this most momentous day. The first day of a new age for monsterkind." He chuckled before adding, "A bold claim, I know. But once you see how transformative today's announcement is, I think you'll agree that our civilization is about to take another great step forwards into the future...led, as always, by the scientific pioneers at Gastcorp."

Noelle heard Kris scoff beside her. "This guy really knows how to ham it up."

She rolled her eyes. Her friend was always so hard to impress. "When *you're* a millionaire scientific genius, Kris, you'll be able to get away with being a little theatrical too."

"Why wait?" Kris said. "I've got nothing against flashiness. Just hope he has something to back up those big words."

Only half paying attention, Noelle flicked her hand at Kris to shush them. "Then shut up and let's find out."

"Some of you may be familiar with the multiverse theory," Gaster was saying. "The unproven but often-speculated idea that there exists an infinite array of alternate worlds parallel to our own, similar in many ways to ours but always with at least one key difference. And yet, for as vast and varied as this multiverse may be, I have no doubt that in no other world is there a modern metropolis as great as our own New Home City." He held up a hand as though to mollify the crowd, although no one had interrupted him. "Please, rein in those looks of confusion and hold your questions for the end. I promise there is a point to this seeming digression."

Gaster held the silence for a moment, just long enough to command rapt attention, before continuing, "It's true, I love this city. As some of you may be aware, I was born here. And it has been both my pleasure and my life's work to shepherd our city and civilization alike into new, ever-greater heights of prosperity. New Home City is more than just our nation's capital - it is the center of civilization, the birthplace of art and culture, the cradle of technology. Thanks to the initiatives of Mayor Holiday's administration" - he gave a grateful nod towards Carol - "we have even taken steps towards healing old wounds and strengthening relations with the human community, attracting more and more human tourists, students and even permanent residents every year. Our city has

become a mecca for the entire civilized world, and our future is diverse and ever-growing.

“But an ever-growing city has ever-increasing needs. Specifically, energy needs. Our aging electrical grid has sometimes struggled to keep up with the demand that we have put on it, and while alternative clean energy projects like wind and solar have helped to bear some of the load, I say that more is needed. That the energy needs of the future will require an energy *source* unlike anything yet dreamed of.” With a twinkle in his dark eye, he added, “Or should I say, anything yet dreamed of before I came along. Because today, that is exactly what I wish to present. A first-of-its-kind reactor that draws power not from any known substance in this world, but from the substance of *others*. Because why drain dry the resources of our single precious Earth when we could tap the pristine wells of a hundred Earths where sentient life never evolved? Why draw on the energy of a single sun when we could harness the power of a thousand suns from a thousand universes?”

At this, the crowd of assembled reporters *did* begin to interrupt, jostling forward with their microphones and cameras and shouting questions in a cacophonous jumble of voices. Noelle had to set her hooves and brace herself to avoid being shoved by the sudden crush of bodies all trying to get closer to the podium - thankfully, Kris took her hand in a tight grip, helping to steady her.

Gaster raised his voice. “Please, I must request that you remain calm! I know how this must sound - like something out of science fiction, or a comic book. But whatever naysaying you feel you must do, whatever skepticism you may wish to express, I ask that you hold it in for just a few minutes more...and then we shall see if you still doubt me.”

At his words, the edges of the tarp behind him began to lift, pulled up by wires so thin as to be almost invisible, giving the appearance that it was floating. And beneath it was gradually revealed the tremendous machine taking up most of the room: a collider-esque ring of electromagnets and copper wire, blinking lights and glowing panels.

“The multiverse, my friends, is real,” Gaster proclaimed. “And my scientists, funded by top-secret federal research grants, have spent years doing the work to prove it. What you see before you now is the fruits of all those thousands of hours of monsterpower. A new type of reactor, designed for Multiversal Energy Collection, Containment and Absorption - or in other words, M.E.C.C.A. Because with this, we’re going to ensure that New Home City remains not only the center of the world - but of *every* world.”

“Holy crap,” Noelle gasped. “Kris, tell me I’m dreaming right now. This can’t really be happening, can it?”

“Oh, it’s happening,” Kris said slowly. They did not sound nearly as enthusiastic as Noelle felt. They sounded dubious. Worried, even. But who cared? Nothing could spoil the giddy excitement that Noelle was experiencing. She didn’t know what she’d been expecting from the presentation, but *this* - this was science to eclipse her wildest imaginings. Science that could change the world.

That is, assuming it worked.

Dr. Gaster seemed confident on that score, however. “But I didn’t come here merely to make empty promises!” he shouted over the noise of the crowd. “I came prepared to prove my findings. Allow me, as the first tiny step into our collective future, to give you a demonstration.”

The lights in the laboratory dimmed. The M.E.C.C.A. reactor began to hum, an electric charge building in the air that made the fur on Noelle's arms stand up. The lights on the sides of the machine began to flash in a looping pattern like the loading screen on a computer, pulses of light flitting across the great ring’s surface, growing faster and faster.

Noelle was on the verge of hyperventilating, too excited to stand still.

“Noelle!” Kris said beside her. Their voice sounded almost pained, sharp with concern. “Something’s wrong!”

But she was barely listening. She couldn’t take her gaze off the huge machine powering itself up before her eyes. Those lights, moving so fast now, seemed almost hypnotic.

It took Kris physically yanking her down by the arm to break her concentration. “Noelle, get down!” they shouted in her ear, pushing her to the floor and throwing themselves over her body.

“Kris, what the heck!” Noelle felt suddenly flush with embarrassment, like the whole room was now staring at her, though of course almost everyone's attention was still fixed upon the reactor. She tried to wrestle Kris off her, not wanting to miss whatever was about to happen.

It was at that exact moment that the power in the lab abruptly cut out, bulbs bursting in a shower of glass and sparks, plunging the room from 'dimly lit' to 'pitch black.'

The explosion followed just a second later.

Chapter 3: Chaos at the Corporation!

Noelle blinked awake, disoriented and confused. She was lying on her back, and her ears were ringing, her view of the ceiling above blurry. The smell of smoke hung heavy and pungent in the air, making her cough. What had happened? Had she fallen?

No...no, she remembered now. Kris had pulled her to the ground, and then...

Kris. Where was Kris? They had been right there, on top of her, and then there had been an explosion. She remembered getting a split-second glimpse of figures being blown off their feet by a shockwave of force, and then she must have blacked out for a moment, stunned into unconsciousness. Only now, Kris was nowhere to be seen.

Noelle sat up, but her head swam. It took a few seconds for her vision to stabilize, for everything to sharpen and come back into focus. She still couldn't hear very well, but she could see people around her. Some were kneeling over figures lying prone on the floor, like she had been, trying to get them to move. Others were running out the door, security guards waving them through, pointing down the hall. All of them were lit by an orange, flickering glow. No one appeared that badly injured, but they all looked scared. She didn't see Kris anywhere among them.

She turned to look behind her, at the reactor, and gasped. Part of that huge ring had collapsed; the ends were on fire, lighting up the room with long shadows and belching dark smoke. One end near the top was hanging on by a bundle of wires, dangling in midair high above her head. Exposed electrical circuits and torn wires sparked wildly. A single brave employee had found a fire extinguisher and was spraying foam towards the blaze, but it was too large and too hot to get very close. In a daze, Noelle wondered why the building's fire suppressant system hadn't kicked in - although, with all those sparks shooting everywhere, perhaps it was a blessing that there were no sprinklers drenching her and the rest of the crowd with electricity-conducting water.

Noelle's gaze traveled downwards from the ruined reactor to the space just below it where her mother and Dr. Gaster had been standing. Both of them were lying face-down on the floor in the shadow of the burning reactor.

Noelle screamed, scrambling on her hands and knees to her mother's side. She rolled Carol over, taking in her mother's slack face and singed fur and clothing. Her eyes were closed, and they did not open when Noelle shook her. "Mom, oh god, no no no, please be okay please be okay *please* - help! Someone help her!" She looked wildly around for her mother's security detail, only to spot them lying still motionless on the floor a few yards away. And was she really surprised? They'd been standing just as close to the blast as her mother had.

She took a deep breath, pulling herself back from the edge of panic long enough to feel her mother's neck for a pulse. And yes, yes, her heartbeat was steady, and

her breathing didn't seem too shallow. She didn't appear to be bleeding, and nothing felt broken. Carol was stunned, unconscious, and probably in need of medical attention - but she would be okay. Noelle folded into herself, letting out a hitching sob of relief as her fear slowly waned.

Beside her, Gaster stirred, groaning. Though he was quicker to recover than Noelle had been: As soon as he woke and his eyes fell upon the damaged reactor, he clambered quickly to his feet, stumbling forwards in horror. "No...no, no, NO!!" His hands raked his bald skull, and for a moment he looked quite demented, his white face cast orange by the flickering glow of the flames, his long shadow stretching to the wall behind him. "This isn't possible!" he ranted to himself. "We triple-checked all the safeties, it couldn't have failed so catastrophically! Someone...someone did this."

He whirled around to face the room - though most everyone outside of Gastcorp security had fled by this point - and screamed, "*How did this happen?! Who did this?!*"

"Dr. Gaster!" Noelle shouted, trying to get his attention; he was the closest person to her and right now, the question of why this disaster had happened was far less important to her than getting her mother to safety and searching for Kris. "My mom, she's hurt! I can't move her on my own, please, you have to help me!"

Gaster blinked down at her, and it seemed to take him a few seconds to recognize what he was even looking at. But then he staggered towards her, mumbling, "Yes...yes, of course." He knelt and scooped up Carol in his arms. "I've got her. Come, follow me, Noelle." He gave one more glance over his shoulder to the flaming machine looming over them. "It's not safe to stay here."

Just then, a door on the far wall of the lab burst open, and a figure came running into the room. Noelle had just enough time to get a glimpse of them through the haze of smoke: A monster with horns and hooves like her, tall and slender. Female, judging from her body shape and long hair. Noelle couldn't make out the woman's face, partly because the smoke was making her eyes water, but also, she realized with a flash of confusion, because the stranger was wearing a dark mask around her eyes. All Noelle could see was a pointed snout. The rest of her was dressed in a shiny, skin tight black bodysuit. She was carrying something under her arm, some kind of glass cylinder.

Gaster seemed to recognize it, for he took a step forward, almost dropping Carol in his haste. "Who are you? What are you doing with that? Put it down, *now!*"

The strange woman in the mask gasped and pointed above them. "Look out!"

As though on cue, there came a groan of buckling metal and a hail of sparks rained down on them. Noelle shrieked, shielding her eyes and looking up just in time to see the wires holding the suspended end of the M.E.C.C.A. reactor snap, the enormous chunk of broken, jagged machinery beginning to fall - directly above where they were standing.

The masked woman sprinted towards them, while Gaster lunged forwards towards *her*; dropping the unconscious Carol like a sack of grain, his hands reaching for the glass tube. The stranger ducked under Gaster's arms and threw herself towards Noelle. But Gaster caught her hair in his boney hand at the last second, wrenching her head back. She screamed wordlessly and flung her arms out, dropping the glass canister - it hit the ground near where Noelle was standing and shattered.

All of this couldn't have taken more than a second or two, but it seemed in that moment like it unfolded in slow-motion. Noelle barely registered any of it, because her eyes were turned upwards and her hooves felt rooted to the spot. She couldn't move; there was no time to run, no time to even think. Death was plummeting towards her, and she was a deer caught in the headlights. She was going to be crushed, and there was nothing to do except screw her eyes tightly shut and -

Wait.

A second passed, then two, and Noelle did not die. She did not even hurt - she felt a soft tickle on her leg, like something brushing her fur, but none of the bone-crushing pain that she had been bracing herself for. Had it already happened and she hadn't felt a thing? Could death possibly be that quick?

She opened her eyes again and looked up. The heavy chunk of burning machinery that had been about to kill her was right there above her head, but it was no longer falling. It had been blocked, by some kind of net, or...

Or a web.

"Move!" a voice shouted, high-pitched and urgent and strangely familiar, breaking through the ringing that still echoed in Noelle's ears. "I can't hold it for long!"

Spider-Human stood there, dramatic in the flickering shadows, muscles straining under their blue costume as they braced their feet against the floor, leaning backwards. Their hands were clenched into fists around the ends of twin sheets of net-like webbing. They had saved her life.

Noelle's legs finally caught up with her brain, and she sprinted out from under the hunk of rubble, hooves crunching over broken glass, running towards her savior. Uncontrolled joy and relief burst through her brain, overwhelming any sense of polite social graces she might normally have hewn to, which is how Noelle Holiday found herself throwing her arms around her superheroic idol and pulling them into a hug that would have surely crushed the bones of any lesser specimen.

"Oh my gosh, you saved my life! That was amazing!" Noelle exclaimed, squeezing them tight against her chest. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Spider-Human let go of their webbing, allowing the twisted hunk of metal to fall harmlessly the remaining few feet to the floor with a loud crash. With their hands free, they awkwardly patted her on the back in a way that was less reminiscent of

someone returning a hug and more like a wrestler tapping out when the other wrestler has them in a chokehold. "Um, uh, you're welcome?" They cleared their throat and added, in a deeper voice, "I mean, you're welcome."

Noelle pulled out of the hug, not out of any belated embarrassment or anything, but so that she could embarrass herself further. "Oh wow I have so many questions!" she babbled. "How did you get your powers? What is your webbing made out of? Do you ever get motion sick when you're swinging around? Did you know that I love you?"

She had the dignity to at least clamp a hand over her mouth and look appropriately mortified when that last one slipped out.

"Oh, uh, haha," Spider-Human laughed, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "Aw shucks. I bet you say that to all the spider-people. Look, I'd love to stay and chat, but you should probably get out of here before anything else blows up or falls on your head. It's still dangerous."

"R-right!" Noelle said, grateful for the change of subject. "But I need to find my friend Kris first!" She had suddenly been reminded of them for some reason, and now she felt bad for having gotten so distracted. "Have you seen them? They're also a human and, uh, about your size..."

She looked down at Spider-Human, taking in for the first time that she was looking *down* at them. Noelle was a pretty tall girl, being a reindeer monster and all, but she'd really been expecting someone like Spider-Human to be taller. Maybe this was just as tall as humans got? That didn't sound right, but she hadn't met enough of them to say for sure. Gosh, all the times she'd teased Kris for being a shortie and it turns out they weren't even any shorter than Spider-Human! Maybe they deserved an apology. She really hoped they were okay.

"Oh, right, I remember Kris," Spider-Human said. "I helped them get to safety a few minutes ago. They didn't want to leave you, but I told them I would come back and make sure you were safe."

"Thanks, Spider-Human," Noelle smiled. Something was tickling the back of her leg. She reached down to scratch it while she added, "I'll go find th- aaaAA! Ow!"

She hopped back on one hoof, looking down at her leg, where a sharp, sudden pain had just stabbed her. "What the *heck*?!"

Noelle pulled up the hem of her dress and twisted her leg around to reveal an enormous spider - easily the size of her palm, and though she had small hands, this was still bigger than any spider had any right to be - just below her knee.

It had its fangs buried in her leg.

"Ew ew ew! Get it off, get it off!" Noelle shrieked, hopping up and down as she shook her leg wildly, partly to dislodge the spider and partly in response to the pain. Her whole leg felt like it was on fire. She gritted her teeth and shook it harder.

The spider fell off and landed on the floor, where it began to scurry away. But Noelle, acting purely on instinct born from shock, revulsion and pain, leapt forward and squished it under her hoof. “Gotcha!”

She raised her hoof and looked down at the flattened remains of the spider, disgust welling up in her like bile. “Grosssss! Where the hell did that come from? Was that yours??”

Spider-Human was staring at her, the big white eyes of their costume somehow looking even wider than usual. They pointed at their own chest with one finger. “Mine?”

“Yeah, like, I don’t know,” Noelle said, grimacing as she inspected the bite on her leg. Already it was red and swelling, a lump twice the size of a quarter. “Your whole thing is spiders and that was a really big spider...”

“I’m not made of spiders, Noelle. Do you think spiders follow me everywhere I go like some kind of Spide Piper?”

“I don’t know!” she said, sucking in a breath through gritted teeth. “Maybe!”

Spider-Human took a step closer, leaning in to look at her leg. “Are you okay?”

“Not really,” Noelle said. “It really hurts.” She felt suddenly dizzy. “Wait...how did you know my -”

“YOU!” a voice called, and Noelle looked over to see Gaster pointing at them.

No, she realized suddenly, not at them. He was pointing at her.

“What have you done?!” Gaster roared, advancing on her. He held something in his hand, his boney fingers woven through it: a long, flowing cascade of white hair. Noelle blinked, confused. A wig?

“What did I do?” she asked stupidly, genuinely bewildered. Her brain felt like it was lagging behind whatever was going on.

Gaster pointed at the squashed spider. “Don’t play dumb with me. I saw you stomp on it. That spider was Gastcorp property! *Valuable* property. And you!” He rounded on Spider-Human, holding up the wig and shaking it at them. “Your accomplice wiggled out of my grasp and left this behind! Admit it, you two are working together, aren’t you? You planned this whole thing! Sabotaging my invention just so that you could swoop in and play the hero, while that little thief friend of yours took advantage of the distraction to steal from my laboratory!”

“That person was a thief?” Noelle asked, staring at the wig. “But...she tried to save me...”

Spider-Human held up their hands to placate the towering skeleton monster. “Woah, hold up a minute here. I saw you wrestling with someone when I came in, but I have no idea who it was. I was a little bit more focused on keeping this nice young lady from getting crushed to death.” Though Noelle obviously couldn’t see their expression through the mask, they sounded angry when they

added, "Though it sounds like you care more about some stupid pet bug getting squished than Noelle *almost dying* because *your* machine blew up!"

"Arachnid," Noelle said automatically, without even thinking about it first.

Spider-Human looked at her. "Huh?"

"Spiders are arachnids, not bugs," she mumbled. "Shouldn't you know that?"

What a stupid thing to focus on right now, part of her thought. Here was a literal superhero, *her* hero, who had just saved her life, and she was correcting them on...entomology? Was that the word? Arachnology?

"I knew that," Spider-Human said, crossing their arms defensively. "I just didn't think Bone Dry the Science Guy over here would know that."

Noelle turned to Gaster. "Oh yeah, also, your creepy spider bit me! I was defending myself." She did feel weirdly guilty now for squishing what was apparently some kind of unique lab specimen, but she couldn't fathom why Gaster seemed equally upset about the spider as he did about his reactor exploding.

Gaster fixed his gaze on her, and when he spoke, the anger had dropped out of his voice, replaced with an uncomfortably intense curiosity. "It *bit* you? Tell me, how do you feel?"

Noelle considered this. How *did* she feel? She felt like her stomach was weighing the option of throwing up. And was it just her, or was it really hot in here? She supposed that made sense, considering that the room was still on fire.

Or, wait, no it wasn't. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that Gastcorp employees had arrived with more fire extinguishers and were putting out the flames. Others were helping rouse those who were still unconscious, including her mother. Everyone seemed safe now. Even the power had come back online, the lights starting to flicker back on. The crisis was over.

"I should find Kris..." Noelle said, taking a step towards the exit.

She only got as far as that one step, however, before losing her balance and pitching forwards.

Spider-Human rushed in and caught her in their strong arms. "Woah, hey! I've got you, take it easy."

Noelle slumped against their chest - shorter than her though they might be, right now they were the only thing keeping her standing. "My hero..." she mumbled feverishly. She frowned and added, "I feel weird..."

"Noelle!" a familiar, crisp voice shouted. "What is going on here? Get your hands off her!"

Noelle turned her head to see, in disorienting sideways vision, her mother stomping towards them.

“Oop, that’s my cue,” Spider-Human said, gently sitting her down on the floor. “Mayor Holiday, hi! Don’t mind me, just saved your daughter’s life, that’s all. Lucky thing your friendly neighborhood Spider-Human was in the, er, neighborhood! Gotta swing, but I’ll leave her in your capable hands! Okay, byeee!” Their voice grew fainter as they spoke, because they had jumped up onto the wall and were crawling away.

Noelle watched them slip into an air vent and make their escape, and all she could think was, *Come back...I still wanted to talk to you.* Preferably without embarrassing herself next time. Though for right now, it was much too late for that. She could hardly think straight, let alone carry a conversation.

“Noelle?” her mother said, kneeling over her. “Honey, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

I met Spider-Human, Noelle thought, smiling to herself as her head swam, and got bit by a spider. How ironic is that?

She passed out then, long before she would come to appreciate just how ironic it really was.

Chapter 4: A Tale of Two Deer

For the second time that night, Noelle awoke feeling fuzzy and disoriented, like all her senses were hovering just outside her body. She was sitting up, but she could feel a vibrating rumble in the seat that made her stomach nauseous. Lights sped past in her peripheral vision, streaks of yellow and red and green in the darkness.

She squeezed her eyes shut hard and then opened them again, blinking until the world resolved itself into shapes that made sense.

She was in the passenger seat of her mom's car, her seatbelt supporting her through unconsciousness. Her mom was driving, and quite a bit faster than she normally did. With a pang of embarrassment, Noelle realized that her mother must have carried her out of Gastcorp after she passed out.

As she stirred and groaned, Carol glanced over at her. "Noelle, you're awake! Thank the Angel. How are you feeling?" The palpable relief in her voice felt unexpectedly touching to hear. Of course her mother had been worried, because of course her mother cared about her. Still, it was nice to have these things confirmed for Noelle now and then.

"I'm okay," Noelle mumbled. She sat up straighter, peering out the window. It was dark, but she didn't recognize this part of the city. "Where are we going? This isn't the way home."

"I'm taking you to the hospital," Carol said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I would have called an ambulance for you, but they were backed up retrieving all the other wounded people from the lab and I didn't want to wait."

"I - I don't need the hospital," Noelle protested. "I'm fine now." She didn't feel fine - she felt feverish and woozy, like a half-melted marshmallow held over a flame. But then, she *had* just narrowly survived being blown up, crushed, and/or trapped in a burning building, so feeling a little sick didn't surprise her. It was probably just the side-effects of shock and exhaustion.

But her mother didn't see it that way. "You're not fine. You *fainted*, Noelle. Right in front of me and Dr. Gaster."

"I remember, thanks," Noelle groaned. She really didn't want to close out the day she'd just had by going to the ER to get poked and prodded by doctors. All she wanted was to fall asleep in her own bed. "I'm feeling better now, though, really. I think it was just all the heat and smoke and stuff in that room, plus, like, the adrenaline spike coming down hard. I just need rest and fresh air, and I won't get either of those in a hospital waiting room. We'd only be taking a spot from someone who needs it more."

To underline her point, she thumbed the button to roll down the passenger seat window. The air outside smelled like car exhaust and smog and all those other ripe, nose-wrinkling city odors, but it did help clear her head a little. She felt herself growing steadier in her body, even if her muscles ached and her heartbeat still felt unusually fast in her chest. Her leg itched horribly, too, but she couldn't twist herself around to examine the bite while she was seated.

After a moment, Carol let out a long sigh and merged into the turn lane, changing course onto a side street. "Fine. I suppose it's been a long enough night as it is. I'll take you home so you can sleep it off. But if you start to notice anything wrong, you tell me and I'll take you to get checked out right away. Deal?"

"Deal," Noelle said, relaxing into the seat and closing her eyes again. "Thanks, mom. I'm just gonna...rest my eyes for a bit."

Her eyelids fluttered open again what felt like just a minute later, but she must have dozed off because suddenly they were already home, her mom cutting off the engine and opening the door. Carol helped her out of the car, though Noelle managed to walk the few steps to the front door unaided, trying to keep from limping. Her leg really did feel painful; part of her was wondering if she'd done the right thing by refusing the opportunity for medical care. She was just so tired...

Where were you when we needed you? Noelle thought bluntly as one of the security guards on the night shift - a tiger with reflective eyes that glinted under the porch light - opened the door for them. The threat to their safety hadn't been at the house, and their security detail had been no help at all after the explosion. If her mom really wanted to keep Noelle safe, she'd hire Spider-Human; they had done a much better job of that tonight than anyone else.

Well, with the possible exception of that half-glimpsed woman, the one Gaster had accused of being a thief, who had charged straight into danger when she'd seen Noelle about to be flattened by that falling debris. If Spider-Human hadn't intervened, they might both have been killed, but at least someone else had tried to save her. Noelle felt sure that Gaster was wrong about the mystery woman, just like he'd been about Spider-Human, because she couldn't imagine a criminal being so selfless. And the way she'd been dressed, with a mask and bodysuit and all that, she was probably a new superhero of some kind and Dr. Gaster had stupidly scared her off before she could help.

It was all too much to make sense of when her skin felt hot and her head dizzy. After assuring her mom again that she just needed some sleep, Noelle headed straight upstairs and down the hall to her room. The house was dark, too big and too empty to offer much comfort beyond the simple relief of having a place to crash after a hard day. She wished that she could curl up in Dess's bed tonight, like she used to do when she was a little fawn and had bad dreams, or had gotten scared by a thunderstorm. But of course, her sister wasn't home. Nor did Noelle really expect her to be anymore. If home sometimes felt to Noelle like just a place to sleep, then it must have felt like even less to December these days.

She didn't even bother to change out of her dress, even though the once-nice velvet was singed and smelled like smoke. Though she'd tried to hide it from her

mother, she felt way too unsteady on her feet to do more than crack her window for some fresh air and then collapse face-first onto the bed.

Even in her exhaustion, she spent a while tossing and turning, trying to get comfortable despite her body's mounting discomfort. But at some point she must have fallen asleep, because the next thing she knew, she was back in the lab at Gastcorp.

She was alone, no sign of Kris or her mom or the rest of the crowd, and the room seemed more vast and dimly lit than it had been in real life. Her green dress was still in pristine condition, but it had changed shape, the material clinging tight to her body and covering her from hoof to neck. Above her loomed the enormous circle of the M.E.C.C.A. reactor, intact and undamaged.

And then a pool of blue light filled the reactor's mouth and through it, like a swimmer emerging from water, stepped her father.

He looked just as she remembered him: Not a zombie, not a ghost, but a sturdy, healthy reindeer with jet black hair and kind eyes.

"D-Dad?" Noelle gasped. "Is that really you?"

"Hello, sugarplum," Rudy smiled, using his old nickname for her, the one he'd never managed to break the habit of, even once she started outgrowing childish pet names. Hearing it again felt like someone giving her heart a firm but gentle squeeze.

She was hugging him then, in the blink of an eye; no transition, no movement, just finding herself with her arms wrapped around her father. He was as warm as sunlight, and Noelle felt a long-lost sense of peace and security soaking into her soul.

But despite her joy, something didn't sit right, an unruly thought that slithered around inside her mind like a warning tingle at the back of her brain. "Dad, if you're here, then am I...dying?"

She could have just as soon asked if she was dreaming, but that would have meant that he wasn't real, and dying felt easier to face than that.

"Oh, sweetheart," Rudy said, putting a comforting hand on her cheek. "It's not your time."

"That doesn't mean I can't still die," Noelle said, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Rudy's gentle eyes looked sad. "Ah, Noelle, if only you didn't have to be so wise."

Behind him, around the great machine, vines had begun to form, or maybe they were tree branches? It was hard to be sure; they didn't behave like any root or branch in the waking world, growing at rapid speed in a huge, intricate pattern like a spider's web. And the branches were blooming, bursting with flowers of

red flame. Noelle watched as the fire spread, enveloping the whole web, becoming a circle of fire.

Rudy was back to standing a few paces in front of her then, once again with no transition, breaking the embrace even though she hadn't let him go, would *never* have let go. He was stepping slowly backwards towards the flames.

"Wait!" Noelle cried. She reached out for him, but she couldn't lift her hooves to follow; when she looked down, she saw that they were webbed to the floor. "Please, don't leave!"

"You'll see me again, Noelle," Rudy said calmly. "One day. But you have so much more to do before then."

He took another step backwards, and disappeared into the web of fire.

Before Noelle could react, the fire *changed*. What had been a web now spread its legs, eight lines of fire gripping the sides of the reactor. A kaleidoscope of fiery eyes opened before her, all of them staring directly at Noelle. An enormous, flaming spider.

An incongruous sound pierced the veil of her dream, and just like that it all dissolved like so much spider silk blown away in the wind. Noelle sat up straight in bed, her fur matted with sweat and her throat dry. Her eyes immediately fell on a dark, hunched shape climbing in through her window.

Images of burglars and gunshots flashed through her half-asleep mind, and she opened her mouth and drew in a breath in preparation for a scream. But before she could release that shout, she noticed the familiar outline of the figure's antlers and heard a muttered swear word as they nearly tripped over the windowsill and lost their balance. Even in the dark, in a state of half-dreaming delirium, Noelle would know the sound of her big sister saying the f-word anywhere.

"Dess?"

Dess's silhouette froze, turning towards the sound of Noelle's voice. "Shit," she swore. "It's okay, Noelle, it's just me. Sorry if I scared you."

Noelle squinted at her through the dark. The digital clock on her nightstand said it was just past midnight, but as that was the only light source in the room aside from the faint glow of the lamps lining the driveway outside, she couldn't see more than just the outline of her sister. "Why are you sneaking in through my window?"

Dess gave a frustrated sigh. "Because for some reason, Mom decided to lock mine. Which means she was in my room today, which I'm not thrilled about, but that's an argument for a later date. I knew yours would be unlocked because you always sleep with it open, which really isn't very safe by the way, Ellie."

"It's a second-story window!" Noelle protested. Her throat hurt, and she reached out for the glass of water she normally kept by her bed, only to remember that

she'd been too tired to pour herself one. She rubbed at her aching eyes and said, "Why are you sneaking in through the windows in the first place?"

December's silhouette shrugged. "Maybe I was tired of Tony the Tightass Tiger out front always asking me stupid questions like "Where were you tonight?" or "Have you been drinking?" It's none of his business. He's a bodyguard, not a babysitter."

"Were you?" Noelle blurted out.

"Was I what?"

"Drinking," she said quietly, her voice whispering the word like it was somehow dangerous to say too loudly. She knew Dess wouldn't answer, and she didn't want another fight, but her head hurt and everything still felt almost like a dream and she was tired of not talking about the things that mattered.

Dess stiffened, standing silently in the shadows for a few long seconds, her expression unseeable and thus unreadable. Then she turned towards the door. "Good night, Noelle."

"Wait!"

Dess, to her credit, paused mid-exit, her hand on the doorknob.

"I almost died tonight," Noelle said in a small voice. She didn't know if it made it easier or harder to say this when she couldn't see Dess's face.

Dess drew in a big breath. "I know."

"Wait, you do? How?"

"Oh, um, I got like, a hundred angry texts from Mom. More angry than usual, I mean. Plus it was on the news. I pieced together what happened."

"Did you text her back?"

"Not really the important part here, Ellie." Dess sighed and walked over to sit down at the foot of Noelle's bed. It was still too dark to see her face well, but Noelle's eyes were adjusting, and her sister's form stood out a bit more clearly from the surrounding darkness at this distance. "What matters is that you're okay. You *are* okay, aren't you?"

"I think I'm sick," Noelle answered truthfully. Every part of her body was aching to go back to sleep, but she didn't want to pass up the chance for a real meaningful conversation with Dess. "Feels like a bad flu or something. But it beats being crushed to death by burning rubble, so...I'm calling it a win?"

"Hey, that's the spirit," Dess said. "If you can survive that, then I'm sure catching a bad bug won't keep you down for long."

Noelle laughed, which turned into a cough that she smothered with her shoulder. "It's more like a *good* bug - er, arachnid - caught *me*." With a blush that it was

thankfully too dark to see, she added, "I thought I was dead for sure. But then... Spider-Human saved me."

"I saw," Dess said. "Um, on the news, I mean." She turned her head, crossing her arms over her chest in an almost sullen gesture. "I'm...glad someone was looking out for you."

"Oh, Dess, they were *amazing*," Noelle gushed. She couldn't help herself. "They were fearless, and so strong! They held up all the heavy machinery that was about to squish me with their webs, even though it must have weighed a ton. They're way stronger than they look for their size! Did you know I'm taller than them? I know, right?! I guess they look bigger on TV. I think it's kind of cute though, you know? Like they're small but so strong and so confident and so mysterious. And so nice, too! I wish I could see them again..."

Dess laughed and leaned in suddenly, trapping Noelle's head in the crook of her arm and giving her a noogie, rubbing her knuckles fast along the top of Noelle's scalp between her antlers, like she was doing that trick with a balloon and static electricity. While she tormented her sister, she said in a sing-song voice, "Somebody's got a cruuuuush!"

"Ow, no, stop it, Deeeesssss!" Noelle whined. "It's not like that! I just think they're cool! They're a hero!" She tried to push Dess off, but half-heartedly. The laughter and teasing felt like a flash of nostalgia for the sibling relationship they'd had before their father's death; even noogies were better than a sister who was barely ever around.

"Sooooooo cool!" Dess concurred. "And so mysterious and so handsome! I mean, I'm assuming. Maybe they're ugly as shit under that mask, who knows?"

"Ohmygod, stop," Noelle laughed. "I couldn't deal. That would be *tragic*."

"I'm sure they're perfectly normal-looking and very kissable," Dess smirked. "And a human, too! Didn't know you were into that, sis."

"Shut uppp!" As it often did when she was embarrassed, Noelle's nose lit up with a glow brighter than the bulb of a Christmas light. She raised a hand to cover it...

...and then froze when she saw her sister illuminated clearly in that red glow.

Dess was wearing a long-sleeved leather jacket and what must have been the only non-ripped pair of jeans in her wardrobe. Her dark hair was messy, and she wore a familiar cocky grin - at least for the second that it hung on her face before she saw Noelle's look of horror.

Because that grin was marred by a puffy busted lip, a chipped front tooth, and streaks of dark dried blood around her mouth and under her nose. The whole left side of her face was battered and bruised, including a black eye that was so swollen that it appeared glued shut, leaving half her face looking like a grotesque horror mask in the blood-red light. She looked worse than Noelle felt.

"Ah hell," Dess said as Noelle stifled a gasp. "I hoped you wouldn't notice. Probably stupid of me. It's gonna take a while for all this to heal, huh?"

“Dess!” Noelle squeaked out. “What happened to your face?!” She didn’t wait for an answer before throwing off the covers and standing up to go flick on the lightswitch. She needed to see the full extent of the damage in the clear, less grisly illumination of the overhead light.

“Would you believe I walked into a door frame?” Dess chuckled darkly.

Noelle would not, and said as much. She leaned over Dess and fussed at her face, turning her chin gently to the side to examine her and feeling uncomfortably big-sisterly for the younger of the two. Admittedly, it wasn’t unheard of for Dess to injure herself - she had always been remarkably accident-prone. But these bruises signaled something a lot darker than an accident.

“Seriously, sis, it’s not as bad as it looks,” Dess said, though she flinched from Noelle’s touch and batted her hand away. “Only hurts when I laugh and all that.”

“That can’t be true,” Noelle frowned.

As though to prove her point, Dess gave a laugh that turned into a sharp inhalation through her teeth. “Yeah, alright, it hurts pretty damn bad. As soon as we’re done here I’m raiding the medicine cabinet for painkillers.”

“Dess...”

“Hey, you’re not looking so hot either, you know,” Dess pointed out. “I mean, the dress is cute, but, uh...you might need to retire it and buy a new one. I don’t think even Mom’s dry cleaners can salvage that.”

Noelle glanced down at herself, noticing for the first time the little rips and scorch marks that her clothes had sustained in the explosion. She still smelled like smoke, too - or maybe that was her fur, it was hard to say. She really needed to shower and change into fresh pajamas or something, but she still felt exhausted and weak in the grip of whatever sudden illness had taken hold of her body. She was suddenly afraid that she might get Dess sick too if this was something contagious, but it was a bit too late for that, and there were questions that demanded to be asked before she could let her sister out of her sight.

“Don’t deflect,” she said firmly. “We may have both had a rough night, but you’re the one who looks like they got punched in the face by a Hulk monster.”

Dess winced, an upsettingly asymmetrical visual on someone who could only open and close one eye. “Noelle, it’s not...it’s not your problem, okay?”

“Don’t give me that! You’re family! Of course it’s my problem.”

“Well I don’t want it to be!” Dess said, standing up abruptly. “I’m sorry, but I can take care of myself.”

“B-bullshit!” Noelle was on her hooves now too, even though her head felt dizzy and she immediately wanted nothing more than to lie back down. “That argument would carry a lot more weight if you weren’t beat up half to death!”

“You’re exaggerating. It was one punch. I can take a freaking punch, Noelle.”

“*One punch* did all that?! From whom? Who hurt you?” First Kris and Susie and now this. How was she supposed to deal with the people she loved getting hurt all the time? She just wanted to keep everyone safe.

“Keep your voice down,” Dess hissed. “You’ll wake up Mom.”

“Mom sleeps like a rock and you know it,” Noelle countered. “Dess, just tell me what’s going on. You’ve been keeping secrets long enough. You have to tell me.”

“No, I really don’t! It’s safer if you don’t know, alright?”

“Wha-what’s *that* mean?” There was a quiver to her voice, because she had just realized that underneath the obstinance and false bravado, Dess was keeping something from her because she was *scared*, and that made Noelle feel scared too. Anything that could frighten Dess must be very dangerous indeed.

“It means that I wish I could tell you, but I *can’t*,” Dess said, a desperate edge creeping into her tone. It was like she could see Noelle sliding towards the cliff of some terrible truth and was grasping for something to pull her back with. “For your own good, I can’t.”

“If...if you’re in trouble, Dess, you need to let us help,” Noelle said, biting back a tremble in her lip. “Mom’s the *mayor* for Angel’s sake, she’s got the chief of police on speed-dial, she can protect you if you let her!”

But Dess just shook her head bitterly. “She couldn’t protect Dad.”

It was like a knife to Noelle’s ribs, even though she knew Dess hadn’t said it to wound her, that the knife went both ways. “That’s...that’s different. Dad died in a break-in, it wasn’t something anyone could predict.”

“Couldn’t catch the guy either, apparently,” Dess said. She walked over to the window, staring intently out at the yard like she expected to see someone lurking behind a tree, some specter of past violence threatening them from the margins of their not-so-safe fortress. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t trust the cops in this city to get shit done.”

“But if someone’s hurting you and you know who it is...”

“Noelle, enough,” Dess said, shooting her a stern big-sister stare (or at least half of one). “I’m gonna handle it, okay? I don’t want you to worry about me.”

Noelle’s voice came out almost as a whisper. “How can I not?”

Dess’s expression softened, and she came over and pulled Noelle into a tight hug. “Hey. We’re okay. It’s just been a long day, and we’re both hurting. You’re sick and you almost freakin’ died today and I shouldn’t have woken you up and dumped my bullshit on you when you were trying to sleep. Let’s get some rest, lick our wounds, and we’ll talk tomorrow.” She pulled back from the hug. “It’ll all be okay.”

Noelle nodded, trying very hard to look brave the way Dess did. She didn’t feel it, though - she felt like something was changing, like the ground was moving

under her hooves and she would have to learn to make do without solid footing.

But then, she supposed solid footing was something she hadn't had in a while. Not since Dad. She wished for the thousandth time that she was strong like Spider-Human. If she was, maybe she could have saved her father. Could protect Dess from whatever was threatening her. Could protect *herself*.

Maybe that was why she liked Spider-Human so much, why she looked up to them, even going so far as to invent a device to mimic their webs: They were always holding things together, and Noelle's life felt like it was splintering. Like if she could just web all the pieces together and pull, everything would be okay.

"You need to sleep, and I really need those painkillers," Dess said, taking a half-step back towards the door. "See you in the morning?"

"See you in the morning," Noelle agreed. But she couldn't shake the feeling that by morning, everything would be different somehow, and those fractured pieces of her life would have drifted too far away to reassemble.

December Holiday squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. The cool night air blowing in through her bedroom window caressed her bruised face.

She hadn't even waited for Noelle to fall asleep before sneaking back out of the house again. She couldn't wait; the night was still young, and she had a job to do.

Still, she couldn't help but glance wistfully at her bed. Dess wanted nothing more than to curl up under those inviting covers and sleep for at least 10 straight hours. But what she wanted didn't have much to do with anything these days.

So she slipped out through the window and shimmied down the branches of the tree that grew just outside it. This was an old, familiar trick for her, so much so that she was surprised her mother hadn't cut the tree down to prevent such stealthy comings and goings. Not that she would have let that stop her. Tonight, however, she was finding it a little harder to climb down when her depth perception was thrown off by one eye being swollen shut.

She wished Noelle hadn't seen that, but that was Dess's fault for being careless. Though she did feel bad about lying to her sister. She'd said "see you in the morning," but she doubted she would be back to the house that night. She had at least left a note for Noelle to find, but she couldn't tell her that the only reason she'd stopped by the house at all was to check that Ellie was okay.

Well, that and to raid the medicine cabinet for some painkillers. The main usage of those pills was for filing down the sharp edges of her mother's migraines (of which Dess had no doubt she was often a contributing factor), but they were equally effective at dulling the pain of a recent blow to the face.

That bastard. Dess hated him more with every painful throb of her black eye. She knew she was lucky, though. Most people who disappointed that guy didn't get off so easy.

She'd been granted a second chance. She knew she wouldn't get a third. It felt like instead of paying off a debt, she was just digging herself deeper into a hole.

Dess didn't get to ponder her predicament for long. Just as she dropped down from the lowest tree branch and felt her hooves hit the ground, she spotted a flashlight beam coming around the corner of the house.

Shit! One of those stupid security guards. Most of the time they just guarded the entrances, but occasionally at night they patrolled the perimeter as well. It was hard to be mad about a little extra security for her family, but it certainly made Dess's life harder. They might not legally be able to stop her from leaving, but she didn't want them reporting her comings and goings to her mother.

With no time to find a better hiding place, Dess ducked down low under the hedges growing around the wall of the house. They were too neatly trimmed to offer much cover, so she would just have to hope that that flashlight beam wouldn't sweep over her.

She watched it grow nearer. It was the human with the reddish-brown hair; she hadn't bothered to learn their name. She knew humans were dangerous in a fight, and this one had a gun on their hip, but that didn't scare Dess one bit. She'd tangled with worse.

As evidenced by her face, she hadn't always *won*, but she'd tangled.

Dess held her breath as the guard walked past her mediocre hiding spot, but they didn't look her way. Why would they? There was no reason to check for intruders under every damn bush.

As soon as the human had rounded the next corner, Dess scrambled out from under the hedge and ran across the lawn and into the surrounding trees. She followed a careful path, the same one she always took, skirting the long driveway, until she reached a particular tree near the front gate. The spot was out of sight, blocked from view of the street by the wall surrounding the property, but faintly illuminated by the lamps flanking the entrance.

She knelt down by the base of the tree and brushed off the leaves that she'd used to cover over a small bundle wrapped in a plastic tarp. She then unfolded that tarp, stripped down to her underwear right there in the glow of the streetlights, and replaced the costume in the tarp with her regular clothes.

Then she slipped into the skintight leather catsuit, folded up the tarp around her clothes again, and disguised it from view. With how brief her stay was, she probably could have just worn the bodysuit under her clothes, but bringing that thing into the house felt like it would be asking for trouble.

Dess put the mask over her eyes, wincing at the way it sat uncomfortably on her swollen face. Looking like someone had just been playing baseball with her face

as the ball slightly ruined the whole 'sexy law-breaking woman of mystery' vibe that she normally felt when she was wearing this get-up. She'd lost her white wig, too, and she didn't have a spare, which meant that even with a mask and a black eye, she was looking far more recognizable than she would have liked.

But it would have to do. Hopefully, if the night's mission went more smoothly than the one that evening, nobody would see her in the first place.

Maybe nobody ever really saw Dess Holiday. And maybe that was for the best.

Chapter 5: Brand New Day

Noelle had a rough night. After Dess left her room, she spent an indeterminate length of time tossing and turning in sweat-stained sheets while she drifted in and out of sleep, feeling feverish and sore all over, her heart pounding, her skin itchy, her blood hot in her veins. The spot on the back of her leg where the spider at Gastcorp had bit her throbbed painfully, and when she delicately probed the area with her fingers, she felt a lump the size of a goose egg.

It was clear that something was wrong with her, something that went beyond mere illness. Perhaps that spider had been venomous; she hadn't looked at it closely enough to identify the species. But surely if that was the case, Dr. Gaster would have warned her, right? When she admitted to having been bitten, his reaction had been more curiosity than concern.

She regretted not going to the hospital now. She needed help, but she felt as shaky and spaghetti-limbed as a newborn fawn, too weak to get out of bed or even to call for Dess in the bedroom next door. She was so thirsty, her mouth so unbearably dry that any attempt to speak came out as a hoarse croak, but she didn't have the strength even to walk to the bathroom and get a glass of water, let alone go wake up her mom and ask for help. All she had the energy to do was curl up into a ball, nuzzle her face into the pillow, and hope she would survive the night.

She must have fallen asleep again, because eventually, Noelle awoke with the disorienting feeling of dragging herself slowly out of slumber, like her body was taking a while to catch up to her mind. She opened her eyes to find the light of the sun sneaking past her bedroom curtains, bright enough around the edges to intrude into the room and burn through the cloudy haze of sleep she had been cloaked in.

Noelle groaned and rolled over, covering her head with her quilt. And it was there, curled into a ball under the covers, that she came back into awareness of her body and made a miraculous discovery: She didn't feel sick any longer.

Sure, she was still very thirsty, and the scent of dried sweat lingered in her fur, but her head had stopped pounding and her muscles no longer ached. Her fever had broken and her heartbeat stabilized, and the extreme fatigue that had plagued her throughout the night was gone.

Cautiously, tamping down the irrational fear that one false move would bring all those pains rushing back, Noelle sat up, threw off the covers, and stepped out of bed.

The movement did not trigger a return of her torments, but rather, the opposite. She felt *good*. She yawned and stretched her torso and arms, noticing as she did so that she felt energized and well-rested, like she was limbered up and ready to run a marathon. She hopped from one hoof to the other a couple times, marveling at how eager and capable her muscles felt, like they hadn't just been screaming in

pain all night. All that stiffness was gone, replaced with strength and vitality, and already her nightmares were fading from memory.

Noelle turned to the wall-length mirror on the sliding door of her walk-in closet, examining her reflection. A memory from the night before came back to her like the recollection of a dream, and she pulled up the hem of her sooty, rumpled dress and twisted around to look at the back of her calf where the spider bite had been. It didn't look as it had earlier - already the swelling was down, a miniscule lump barely visible among her fur.

Nice try, spider, she thought victoriously, but it'll take more than that to keep me down!

She should tell Dess the good news. Right now her relief was so great that it felt like anything was possible, even getting to the bottom of whatever trouble her sister was in.

Noelle turned to leave the room, with the intention of getting some water and then going to find Dess. It was then that she noticed the folded piece of lined paper, torn from a notebook or journal, that had been slipped under her door.

She knelt to pick up the note. Unfolding it and smoothing it out, she held it up to the light and read:

Sorry for not sticking around. I hope you're feeling better, but I had an appointment to keep and I didn't want to wake you. Also didn't want Mom to see me like this. She'd take one look at my face and freak out, and the last thing I need right now is to be grounded. It's better if I stay out of her way for a bit. I wish I could explain, but I can't, so I'll just have to ask you to trust me.

*Love you!
Dess*

PS. DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME.

PPS. DON'T TELL MOM.

Worry and disappointment surged inside Noelle. And here she'd thought that Dess might actually open up and tell her what was going on. But it looked like she was set on keeping her secrets for now - and leaving Noelle in the dark.

She clenched her fist angrily around the note, crumpling it into a ball, and moved to toss it across the room into the trash bin by her desk.

But when she threw it, it stayed in her hand.

Noelle blinked and tried again, but it was as though the paper had glued itself to her palm. She uncurled her fist and tried to drop it, but all that happened was that the paper stretched itself back out, sticking to her fingertips. It didn't feel sticky to the touch, but through some weird quirk of static electricity or something, it didn't want to detach itself from her hand.

She flapped her hand wildly, trying to shake it loose. "Ugh, stupid thing! Let go!"

And just like that, it did. The sheet of paper dropped away from her fingertips and drifted to the floor as if it had never been stuck in the first place.

Noelle stared at it for a moment, trying to decide if she should pick it up and risk the same bizarre occurrence happening again. She decided to leave it where it was. There was no time to dwell on whatever that had been; she needed to get going before she was late to school.

She slipped down the hall into the bathroom and drank two entire glasses of water before turning on the shower and finally taking off her ruined dress. As she was about to get in the shower, she glanced down at her stomach and stopped dead, staring down at herself in confusion.

Noelle had never been what you'd call curvy - reindeer monsters were generally tall and lean in shape - but she'd also had a bit of adolescent chub that she'd never been able to shake. That was gone now. Her stomach was flat as an ironing board. Curious, she poked at her abdomen and was surprised to discover that it was firm to the touch, as though all the fat in her body had been absorbed and turned into muscle overnight.

This was, of course, impossible, but a quick inspection of the rest of her body bore out similar discoveries. Her arms sported firmer, more defined muscles, as though she were reaping the benefits of a nonexistent push-up regimen. Her legs were toned too, the muscles limber and well developed.

Noelle couldn't explain how this change had come about - nothing in the books about monster puberty her mom had made her read a few years back had mentioned this. All she knew was that suddenly she looked as strong and healthy as she felt, when just hours earlier she had thought she might be dying.

Well. She didn't have time to look a gift horse in the mouth. She could figure out what had happened to her later. Maybe ask Dr. Gaster just what the hell kind of spider had bitten her anyways.

Noelle could feel her classmates' eyes on her when she arrived at school, and not just because she'd gotten there late and had interrupted Ms. Alphys by barging into the classroom mid-lecture. She'd been so worried about the blemish a tardy mark would leave on her perfect attendance record that she had sprinted all the way there from the bus stop, but she wasn't even breathing hard by the time she slipped into her chair.

At least Berdly wasn't there today for whatever reason. The events last night had probably made the news by now, and she had been expecting a torrent of questions to answer as soon as she got in the door.

She was halfway through shooting off a belated text to her mother ("I'm at school and feeling much better!") when a paper airplane landed on her desk,

flying right over her shoulder and nose-diving into her open textbook. Noelle looked over her shoulder to see Kris in the seat behind her. They pointed at the paper airplane and mouthed, *Read it.*

Noelle felt a sudden pang of guilt when she realized that she'd never managed to find Kris in the aftermath of the explosion at Gastcorp. Spider-Human had assured her that they'd made it out unharmed, and sure enough, they looked fine now, but she still felt like a bad friend for having left them to fend for themselves in a situation like that.

So while she normally would have resented them trying to distract her during class, this time she humored them, unfolding the paper airplane to read their note, which said simply: *Glad you're alive. The rumor mill's been going crazy today.*

That explained why everyone had been staring and whispering when she walked in. Noelle had never been late before, so all her classmates had probably thought that she was in the hospital with third-degree burns or something.

She wrote, *Glad you're alive too. Sorry I disappeared on you last night. I, uh, kinda fainted a little! It was super embarrassing actually. But on the bright side! I met Spider-Human!! And they saved my life!?!?!?* beneath Kris's note. Then she neatly folded the paper up and discreetly held it behind her chair to pass to Kris while she pretended to pay attention to what Alphys was writing on the chalkboard. For a moment, she was afraid that weird 'sticky hands' thing would happen again, but thankfully they were able to take it from her with no trouble.

A minute later, they pressed the (no longer neatly folded) paper back into her hand. The new addition read, *Awesome! Were they as cool and heroic in person as all those doodles in the margins of your notebook make them look?*

Noelle blushed, clamping a hand over her nose to hide the fact that it was starting to glow red. Though she quickly thought of a perfect counter to turn that embarrassment right back around on them, hastily writing, *They were actually surprisingly short. Like, suuuuper tiny. Almost as short as you.*

The response came back faster this time. *See, you say that as a burn but it's actually more evidence of short person supremacy. We run the world, Noelle.*

Noelle rolled her eyes and jotted down another quick note: *Where's Berdly btw? Not like him to miss class.*

Kris's reply: *He called out sick today. Something about a flu that only affects bird monsters.*

Noelle shrugged and turned her attention back to taking notes on Alphys's lecture. She could always call Berdly later to go over what he'd missed. She would just have to pay extra close attention today! They had exams this week, and while her life might be super crazy right now, she still had to keep up her GPA.

Noelle spent lunch hanging out in the cafeteria with Kris, catching them up on her account of everything that had happened after they got separated at Gastcorp. They seemed particularly interested in her impressions of Spider-Human, though she resisted their attempts to tease her. Was it romantic, being saved from certain death by a brave, dashing hero? Yeah, obviously. But was she going to admit as much to her snarky little gremlin best friend? Hell no. They just wanted ammo to use against her. She was wise to their game!

Eventually, as they usually did when they ran out of conversation topics, they spent the last few minutes of their lunch break looking at their phones. Noelle scrolled through the Monster X app (recently renamed by the company's CEO, Alan Musty; personally, Noelle missed the cute bird logo it used to have, which had always reminded her of Berdly) just to see what was going on in the world, but most of her feed was dominated by coverage of a single breaking news story, one very close to home.

"Hey, check this out," Noelle said, nudging Kris and leaning over to play a video for them, another live helicopter news camera feed from MNN.

"We're coming to you live from the Monsterhatten Bridge," the news anchor said, "where an armored truck transporting cash, gold bars, and other valuable cargo is under attack by the super-criminal duo known as the Hippo and the Condor. Drivers on the bridge abandoned their cars and fled on foot when the Hippo, armed with enhanced strength and an enormous maw like a steel vise, began throwing their vehicles into a barricade to block the escape of his target. Meanwhile, the bank security guards and their police escort are being dive bombed by the Condor. With bullets appearing to bounce uselessly off the villain's metal wings, they're powerless to stop him from scooping them up one by one in his talons and throwing them into the river, where nearby coast guard boats have quickly gathered to help pull the victims from the water.

"Previous attempted crimes by the pair of thieves have been thwarted by the masked vigilante known as Spider-Human, but with no sign of the costumed crime-fighter on the scene thus far, citizens are left to wonder: Who will protect us from this latest assault on law and order?"

Kris stared at the video with an impassive look on their face. "Wow, that's, uh, that's crazy. Someone should do something."

"I'm sure Spider-Human will be there any minute!" Noelle said, watching the video feed intently for any sign of that familiar blue figure swinging into frame. "Oh gosh, I hope they won't get hurt. Did you see those armored suits that Hippo and Condor are wearing? Those are new, right? I've never seen them in costumes like that before."

"Uh-huh," Kris said, standing up from the table and grabbing their backpack. "Um, Noelle, I just remembered that I...uh, forgot to print a paper copy of my essay for Mr. Gerson's English class. So I'm just gonna run to the school library and do that real fast before class starts! See you later!"

“Oh, sure, okay Kris,” Noelle said absently, still staring at her phone. “Better hurry or you’ll be late to class!” She glanced up to wave goodbye, but they were already halfway across the cafeteria, sprinting for the exit.

Noelle turned her attention back to crime scene coverage on the news, but just then, the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. She groaned at the poor timing, but reluctantly put her phone away. She would have to wait and find out what happened later.

On her way to her next class, however, while she stopped at her locker to swap out her textbooks, Noelle heard a familiar growl of a voice from behind her.

“Well, well, look who’s still with us. I heard you almost got incinerated in some kinda freak accident last night. Some people have all the luck, am I right, girls?”

“She’s got more lives than a cat,” Catty purred.

“I’m confused,” Bratty mumbled. “Are we jealous that she almost died?”

Noelle sighed and turned around to face them. She wasn’t scared of Susie, she realized. After her aforementioned near-death experience, the school bully didn’t feel nearly as intimidating as she used to. “Hi, Susie.”

“Don’t you ‘hi, Susie’ me, nerd,” Susie Thompson snarled. “We’re not friends. I just wanted to tell you how glad I am that you didn’t die so I can kill you myself.”

“Gosh,” Noelle said sarcastically, “at least buy me dinner first.”

Susie’s eyes narrowed and her nostrils flared. “The hell would I do that for? If anything, you should be the one buying *me* dinner, rich girl.”

“I thought you’d never ask!” Noelle smiled. “How does 8 o’clock sound?”

“What?” Susie growled. “You trying to confuse me or something, Holiday? ‘Cause it won’t work. Dreemurr freak’s not around to save you this time.” She held out a scaly claw, palm up. “I know you got cash on you. Time to pay the ‘Susie doesn’t eat my face’ toll.”

“Or what?” Noelle glared at her. “You’ll beat me up like you beat up Kris last week?”

Susie’s brow crinkled in confusion. “Huh? I never touched the weirdo.”

“I saw the bruises, Susie. I know what you did.”

“You don’t know shit. Little freak’s blaming me for shit I didn’t do now? The hell is their problem?”

“Look,” Noelle sighed, “let’s make a deal, okay? Kris didn’t tell anyone except me that you hit them. And I won’t tell anyone either, provided you leave them alone from now on.”

But the anger in Susie's eyes only intensified. "You trying to blackletter me or something? How's about this for a counter-offer?" She took a step closer, backing Noelle against the lockers. "I beat you up for lying about me beating up your friend!"

"W-wait!" Noelle squeaked, holding up a hand. But Susie was already pulling back her fist.

Noelle felt a strange tingling sensation across her scalp, like her very skull was vibrating. For a split-second, Susie's fist seemed to move in slow-motion, the threat of the punch so clearly telegraphed that Noelle had plenty of time to overcome her initial shock. On instinct, moving faster than she had thought herself capable of, Noelle ducked her head out of the way.

Susie's fist slammed into the locker where Noelle's head had just been, and she let out a cry of pain, furiously shaking her hand. "God shitting damn it!" Noelle had already ducked out from under her arms, but Susie whirled around to face her. "Get back here! I'll teach you not to deface...to defect...to lie about me!"

They were drawing a crowd of onlookers. The other students, already prone to giving Susie a wide berth, had retreated to clusters on either end of the hall, clearing a space in the middle for the fight. Even Catty and Bratty had scrambled for cover, not wanting to take friendly fire from Susie's flailing fists.

Susie charged at Noelle and threw a punch, but Noelle ducked under it with ease. That weird tingle in her head made it easy to judge the timing, flaring up with a strong buzz every time the bully was about to swing at her, like some kind of sixth sense. And when she dodged, it was as though she was moving so fast that nothing could stop her. Like a knee-jerk reaction that barely required any input from her. She simply felt the punch coming and reacted faster than Susie could.

She should have been afraid - she'd never been in a fight before. But as she danced circles around Susie, she found herself laughing out loud, because this wasn't scary at all. It felt good, putting all that newfound energy she'd been holding in her body all day to use. It was *fun*.

Of course, her laughter only further enraged Susie, who mistook it for a taunt. "Stand still, you bouncy little \$*@&#! I'll wipe that smile off your face!"

"Gotta catch me first!" Noelle giggled. "If you can catch me, I'll give you a kiss!" In a cheeky burst of boldness, she darted in close to Susie, ducking under her arms, and then popped up and planted a quick kiss on the girl's cheek before pushing off of her and bounding back away again.

Susie staggered back, touching her cheek with shocked eyes like she couldn't believe that Noelle had just done that. And then the scales of her face turned a deeper shade of purple and smoke began to puff from her nostrils, a look of embarrassed anger on her face. She lunged forward, head down and arms extended not to punch but to grab, a mass of charging muscle too large to dodge.

"Uh oh," Noelle gulped. Susie was coming at her like a bull and her head was buzzing like a beehive.

She did the only thing she could think of. She jumped. Not off to the side, but straight up. She didn't even realize what she was doing until she was already doing it, leaping high into the air, legs spread to avoid Susie. Susie's head passed right under her, and Noelle kicked off of the dragon girl's shoulders, sending Susie careening headfirst into a locker.

Noelle was in flight, and the ceiling was coming up too fast, she'd gone too high and now she was about to hit her head. She felt her antlers punch through the thin insulation of the ceiling panel, and she quickly reached up to touch the ceiling, to arrest her momentum and push herself down so she could drop safely back to the floor.

It didn't quite work out that way. She *did* touch the ceiling, and she did try to push off of it, but when she did so, she didn't fall. It took her a second to realize why. It wasn't just that her antlers were stuck: It was that she was hanging suspended by her palms, her hands glued to the ceiling like they'd stuck to that letter in her room that morning. Only this was even more impossible - her arms were supporting her entire weight, her legs kicking at thin air, hooves dangling off the ground.

Glancing down around her in a panic, Noelle saw that Susie was lying stunned on the floor, a head-sized dent in the locker above her. The other students, however, were all staring at Noelle. Some of them looked shocked, hands clamped over their mouths. Others were pointing and laughing in disbelief, struck by the absurd, impossible spectacle. Several of them had their phones out and pointed at her.

"What the... stupid... gahh!" Noelle sputtered, trying to pull her hands free of whatever had stuck them to the ceiling. She kicked her legs in frustration, her nose glowing red and hot, which of course only added to her embarrassment. She was suddenly very glad that Susie had knocked herself out before seeing this (though all the people filming meant that she'd see it sooner or later, a thought which made Noelle want to drop out of school and never show her face here again). "Hey! Put your stupid phones away and help me down!"

Just then, a stern voice echoed loudly down the hallway. "What in the Angel's name is going on here?" From Noelle's vantage point she could see Principal Toriel pushing her way through the crowd.

Noelle pulled harder and a chunk of the ceiling finally cracked under her hanging weight and came loose. With a sudden "eep!" she fell, landing sprawled on her back, surrounded by white dust and plaster chunks.

She raised her hands to find that her sticky fingers had come loose from the chunk of ceiling tile in the fall. But she didn't have time to wonder about this before she saw Toriel looming over her in full principal mode, an authoritative yet bewildered expression on her face. "Noelle! What is the meaning of this?"

"Uhhh," Noelle sat up, feeling suddenly ashamed of herself. "Susie, um, attacked me? And then she, uh, knocked herself out?"

"I see..." Toriel said, looking over at where Susie was stirring and rubbing her head with a groan. She then looked up. "And what happened to the ceiling?"

"I, um, I'm not really sure," Noelle said sheepishly.

"She was stuck to it!" some kid called out from the crowd of onlookers.

Toriel looked at Noelle in confusion. "You were...stuck to the ceiling? By your antlers, I assume?"

"Um...something like that..."

Toriel sighed. "Okay, Noelle. Come with me and you can explain exactly what happened." She wheeled around to point at Bratty and Catty, who were trying to sneak away out of sight. "Bratty, you come with me as well. I am sure you witnessed the whole thing, the way you are always following Miss Thompson around. And Catty, will you please take Thompson to the nurse's office? Your friend may not be the most... 'popular' student here, but I will not leave her concussed on the floor."

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" Susie snapped, staggering to her feet. Catty tried to prop her up and help her stand, but she snatched her hand away. "You think I can't handle a little bonk on the head?" She gestured at the dent her head had left in the locker and added, "I - I meant to do that! Holiday's just lucky she's so freakishly fast."

Toriel arched an eyebrow. "So your intention was to assault Noelle with your skull?"

Susie prodded a visible lump on her head and winced. "Is that some kind of trick question?"

"You had better follow me, Susie," Toriel said. She turned back to Noelle, steering her away with a firm but gentle paw on her shoulder while Susie and Bratty reluctantly trailed after them. "For goodness sake, Noelle, fighting in the halls? I would have expected that from your sister when she was a student here, but from you?"

"I...I didn't start it, Ms. Toriel, really," Noelle protested. She hesitated for a moment, weighing the risks of going against Kris's wishes, but in light of Susie trying to assault her as well, it seemed like a secret she couldn't afford to keep any longer. She just hoped they wouldn't be mad. "There's something you need to know about Susie and...and Kris."

"We will speak in my office," Toriel said. "Just be honest with me, and I am sure we can sort this all out."

“You’re a freaking liar!” Susie sprang to her feet and slammed her fist on the desk, smoke steaming from her nostrils as she glared at Noelle in the chair next to her.

Noelle shrank back into her seat, her brain overloaded by a contradictory mix of intimidation, embarrassment and...other things that she didn’t want to unpack just then. No one had ever yelled at her like that or looked at her with such anger in their eyes before Susie. She didn’t think she was supposed to find such things *exciting*, and yet...

But then she remembered Kris’s bruises and snapped out of it. Susie wasn’t the beginning of some enemies-to-lovers arc like in the transformative fanworks she liked to read on Monster AO3. Susie was just a bully, and bullies had to be stopped before they got out of control.

“You’re the one who’s lying!” she protested, summoning her courage. “Kris told me what you did after school! I saw the bruises with my own eyes.” She looked to Toriel pleadingly. “Ask them yourself. We never provoked Susie or anything, she just has it out for us. She attacked me today, and she probably would have hit me on Friday if Kris hadn’t stopped her. That must be why she beat them up after school, to get back at them for interfering.”

“I never touched the frea-” Susie started, before glancing at Toriel’s grim expression. She sat back down in a huff and amended herself quickly, “Uh, I mean Kris. I never hurt Kris. Noelle’s making that up.”

Toriel had been wearing a face like a tightly controlled mask ever since Noelle told her about Kris’s injuries. Now, she drew in a deep breath and slowly released it in a practiced way. “These are very serious accusations, Ms. Thompson, but I have never known Noelle to be a liar. And even if we only take today’s incident into account, you still threw a punch - more than one - at a fellow student. Do I have that right, Bratty?”

Bratty looked from Toriel’s pointed request for corroboration to Susie’s hostile glare and gulped. “You should have seen it, Ms. Dreemurr. Noelle moved so fast, Susie couldn’t even touch her. She was even laughing at her and stuff. Like she was just playing with her.” She shrugged her thin shoulders. “Honestly, I don’t think Noelle was like, really in any danger, you know?”

“Way to make me sound tough,” Susie growled at her. “Bad enough half the school saw it go down. I’m gonna be a freakin’ joke around here at this rate!”

“I do not think you will have to worry about that,” Toriel said briskly, “considering I am suspending you effective immediately.”

“WHAT?!” Susie roared, leaping to her feet again. “But I didn’t even hit her! You - you can’t do that!”

“I most certainly can. And whether or not you succeeded in injuring Ms. Holiday is not the point, Susie. The point is that you tried. Combine that with your extensive and well-documented record of bad behavior...” She gave a tired sigh. “We have tried detention, we have tried every other deterrent in our power, but

nothing seems to work. I believe in second chances, Susie, but you have already been given more than most. I cannot allow you to continue attending this school if you insist on being a danger to your fellow students. I will be speaking with my child to ascertain the truth of Noelle's claims about you and Kris, and if I find out that you harmed them, you can rest assured that you will be facing more than just a suspension. Do I make myself clear?"

Susie sank back into her seat, an expression of chastened turmoil on her face. "Please, Ms. Dreemurr. What am I supposed to tell my dad? If he finds out I've been suspended, he's going to be so pissed."

Noelle felt a sudden rush of sympathy. She'd never heard Susie talk about her family before, but it didn't take a genius to deduce that a bully like her probably didn't have the best role models at home. As distant as Noelle's mother could be, at least Noelle never doubted that Carol wanted what was best for her. And her father...well, his love was something that would always be part of her. A permanent and immutable fact, even when his own existence had not been.

But Susie didn't even have that much to take comfort in.

Toriel was unmoved, however. "I am afraid, Susie, that that is the bed you have made for yourself."

Bratty raised a tentative hand. "Um, Ms. Toriel, I'm not suspended too, am I?"

"No, Bratty," Toriel sighed. "As far as I can tell, you have not actually done anything."

"Okay, cool," Bratty said with a look of relief. "I can go, then?"

Toriel nodded her assent, and Bratty scurried out the door, ignoring Susie's muttered accusation of "Traitor."

"You are free to go as well, Susie. I suggest you promptly get whatever you want to take from your locker and then leave. And I would appreciate it if you did not make a scene on your way out."

Susie stood, making a show of slowly and noisily pushing in her chair. While she did so, her voice covered by the noise, she leaned in a bit closer to Noelle and whispered, "Better hope I don't see you outside of school, Holiday."

A little shiver ran down Noelle's spine, but Susie was already on her way out, slamming the door behind her.

Toriel let out a long sigh, and then retrieved a slip of paper from her desk and scribbled something on it before handing it to Noelle. "Here, this will excuse you from being late to class. I am sorry this unpleasant business interrupted your day. Oh, and Noelle?"

Noelle looked up. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Thank you for telling me about Kris. It...worries me that they would keep something so important a secret from me."

“They said they didn’t want Susie to get into trouble,” Noelle recalled. “Even if she probably deserved to.”

Toriel smiled fondly. “That does sound like them. Kris has a kind heart. The two of you are a lot alike in that way. Always wanting to protect people.”

“I try to,” Noelle said, but she thought about broken promises and the desperate look on Susie’s face, and wondered if she wasn’t just making everything worse.

When the bell rang and school got out for the day, Noelle was half-expecting Susie to be waiting somewhere outside to ambush her, but there was no sign of her anywhere. She didn’t see Kris around either; they could be hard to spot in the crush of students spilling out of the building, but they usually met up with her and walked with her at least as far as the bus stop before their paths home diverged.

Today, though, no sign of them. With a small twinge of sad anxiety, Noelle wondered if maybe they had already heard about Susie, and now they were avoiding her because she broke her promise not to tell Toriel.

She was about to get out her phone and text them when she got a call. It was from a number she didn’t recognize, but she answered it anyway, just in case it was something more important than a telemarketer. “Noelle Holiday speaking.”

“Hello, Noelle.” The voice on the other end was instantly recognizable, even muffled by the crackle of a spotty phone connection. “This is Norman Gaster.”

“Oh my gosh, hi!” Noelle sputtered. Dr. Gaster had never called her on her cell phone before - she wasn’t even sure how he’d gotten her number. Probably from her mom. “I wasn’t expecting to hear from you, Dr. Gaster.”

She heard a dry, distorted chuckle. “Please, call me Norman. We almost died together last night, so I think we can dispense with the formalities. But tell me, how are you feeling after...everything that happened to you?”

“Um, I’m okay,” Noelle said. “It’s nice of you to check up on me, but honestly I’m feeling fine. Just happy to be alive, you know? How is everything at Gastcorp? I just mean, there was a lot of damage, so I imagine things are still pretty hectic over there.” Which made the CEO of the company taking the time to call her even more surprising.

“More than you know,” Gaster said. “But you needn’t worry about any of that, Noelle. Gastcorp is strong - it will endure this blemish on our record. I was actually calling you about a different matter.”

“Oh?”

“That invention of yours from the other day, your...what did you call them?”

“I, um, hadn’t come up with a name yet,” Noelle said, a blush in her nose threatening to flicker into a glow. ‘Webshooters’ was spoken for, even if that’s essentially what they were. Though maybe she shouldn’t be embarrassed by the association, since Spider-Human had used something similar to save her from a gruesome death.

“Well, regardless,” Gaster said, “I’d still like to meet with you to discuss it. Recent events have not lessened my interest in your future with Gastcorp. I hope you feel the same.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Dr - I mean, Norman.” Okay, that sounded super weird to say. She tried to channel her mother and pivot to a more professional tone. “I’m sure you have a lot on your plate right now, and I know I’m probably not your highest priority, so I appreciate the personal call. Should I make an appointment with your secretary?”

“Oh, no need for all that,” Gaster said quickly. “I was actually wondering if you could stop by this afternoon. If my timing is correct, you should have just gotten out of school, yes? I could even send a driver to pick you up if you’d rather not deal with the hassle of taking the train.”

It was the strangest thing: As Gaster spoke, Noelle experienced that same tingling feeling prickling her scalp that she had felt when Susie threw a punch at her. It was a fainter buzz this time, less of a warning siren and more a slight tickle, but it still made her shudder with the oddness of the sensation.

“Gosh, that’s generous of you, Dr. Gaster, but it’s awfully last minute,” she said into the phone, picking up her pace as she walked to the bus stop.

“Why wait?” Gaster said, his voice coming through choppy and muffled. “It’s never too early to secure your future, Noelle.”

“I totally agree, it’s just that I’m swamped with homework this week, and I’ve got exams coming up soon. How about next week sometime? I’ll be a lot less busy then, and I’m sure things will have calmed down a bit on your end as well.”

All of these things were true, but that wasn’t why she said them. She said them because there was a pressure in her skull, like a headache and an itch all in one, and through some inscrutable instinct, she sensed that this conversation was the cause. Something about Gaster’s invitation felt wrong, and though she couldn’t hazard a guess what that might mean, she was going with her gut. Or in this case, her head.

Gaster was silent on the other end for a few seconds, almost long enough that Noelle was about to ask if he was still there, before his voice returned to say, “Of course, of course, I wouldn’t want you to suffer academically. But I do think it would be beneficial for us both if we could meet soon, so why don’t you tell me the next day you’ll be free, and we can make arrangements.”

“Uh, I’ll check my calendar and get back to you!” Noelle said. “My bus is here, gotta go! Thanks so much for calling, Doctor, talk to you soon!”

Gaster began saying something else, but she couldn’t hear him clearly as she lowered the phone from her ear and ended the call.

It was only afterwards, while she waited impatiently at the bus stop, tapping her hoof against the pavement, that Noelle realized the tingle in her scalp had stopped at the same time as she’d hung up the phone.

Chapter 6: Battle on the Bridge

Kris Dreemurr was definitely going to miss third period again. They would be in for another awkward conversation with Principal Mom when Toriel got wind of their declining attendance record.

Saving the city from superpowered criminals should really count as extra PE credit or something, they thought, right before the Hippo punched them in the face.

Kris went flying head over heels and slammed into a nearby police car hard enough to leave a Kris-sized dent. *Ow ow ow*. Great, more bruises to add to their collection. They had only just stopped aching from their tangle with Terrorantula a couple days ago.

“Hey!” a pig monster in a police uniform shouted at them. “That’s my car! Do you know how much one of those costs the department?”

Kris waved him off while they tried to stop their head from spinning. “Tell Undyne to put it on my property destruction tab.”

“You masked menace!” the cop oinked. “Get out of here, you’re not helping!”

But Kris ignored him, already staggering to their feet. The cops always made a show of refusing help, but they were clearly out of their depth here. Kris was the only one strong enough to stop the rampaging villains before some innocent bystander got dusted.

“Oof,” a nasally, stuffed-up voice squawked through the intercom in Kris’s ear. “That looked like it hurt. The good news is, the biometric data from your suit isn’t showing any broken bones.”

“Still feels almost as bad as you sound,” Kris said, running back down the bridge towards Hippo. “Bird flu for birds kicking your feathery butt, huh?”

“I can’t complain, Kris,” Berdly croaked. “It’s still preferable to the literal ass-kicking you are currently receiving.”

“Anytime you want to trade places, just say the word. And it’s Spider-Human, not Kris. I thought I told you to use codenames on this channel.”

“I’m perfectly happy being your guy in the chair, thank you. I know the glamor and glory of combat is sadly not for me, Kri- er, Spider-Human. I have very brittle bones, you see.”

Kris’s spider-sense pinged them with a familiar tingle: In the sky above, the Condor was turning in a wide circle, preparing to dive bomb them. “It’s a shame you’re not here. Maybe you could cough on this guy and defeat him with the power of germs.”

Berdly gave a loud, wet sniff. "He's not even a real condor, you know, just a bluebird in a flight suit with a bigger wingspan and a jetpack. Frankly, I find it pretty insulting! Why, it's nothing less than cultural appropriation! You don't see me going around pretending to be an eagle."

"I guess he thought that The Bluejay wasn't a cool enough villain name."

"We can be cool too!" Berdly huffed.

"Hold that thought." Condor dived, and Kris pretended they hadn't noticed, only to jump off the ground into a backwards flip at the last second, leaping right over Condor's head.

They shot a webline that stuck to the villain's back, and Condor pulled up out of his dive, dragging Kris into the air behind him. In seconds, the Monsterhatten Bridge dropped away, growing smaller and smaller below them.

Kris tried not to look down and instead focused on pulling themselves up the webline, hand over hand, until they reached the Condor's back.

"Get off, you fool!" Condor screeched, flapping his mechanically enlarged wings. He was a surprisingly old monster for his chosen profession, his blue feathers going gray and his voice rough and gravelly with age. "I won't be able to stay aloft with you throwing off the balance of my suit's gyroscopes!"

"That's kinda the idea, Condor! I'm just helping you stress-test your new suit! What's the point of upgrading if you still can't handle a little extra weight? I don't even weigh that much, you know, I'm light as the proverbial feather."

"Kris," Berdly said through the intercom, "infrared sensors in your suit's eyepieces are picking up a large heat source on his back, above the thruster. Do you see it? Logic suggests that must be his jetpack's power source. I recommend attempting to disable it."

"Predictable old Condor," Kris chuckled. They raised their voice and continued, "I'm just saying, Condor, what happens if you go a little too hard on the ice cream and put on a few pounds? Do you have to recalibrate the whatchamacallits just to keep your wrinkly old ass in the air? If you want to fly so bad, you should try web-slinging. It's by far the best way to travel. 9 out of 10 spiders agree!"

"Enough with your prattle!" Condor yelled. He attempted to shake Kris off with a barrel roll, the horizon and the city below spinning dizzily, but they had their palms stuck securely onto the back of his suit, and they weren't going anywhere.

Instead, they grabbed the raised protrusion that Berdly had pointed out and ripped off the exterior casing, exposing a battery pack underneath. "Oh well, I wouldn't worry about putting on weight where you're going, anyways. I hear prison food isn't that fattening."

They moved to rip out the battery, only to freeze, their muscles locking up, as an electric current flowed through their body. "AAAARRRGHHH!"

“Idiot!” Condor crowed. “Did you really think I’d leave my one weak point unprotected?” He flipped upside down, and Kris, too stunned to keep their grip, fell into the open air. “Happy landings, Spider-Human!”

The supervillain’s laughter was lost to the wind as Kris fell. The air buffeted their body, but they couldn’t move. It was a struggle just to keep their eyelids open - darkness encroached on the corners of their vision.

“Kris!” Berdly’s shrill voice in their ear pulled them back from the edge of unconsciousness. “You’re losing altitude fast! Even you can’t survive hitting the river from this height. You need to deploy the web wings!”

With a supreme effort, Kris managed to flip themselves over. As soon as they did so, they saw the Monsterhatten Bridge growing rapidly larger below them. Condor had flown them far enough away that they wouldn’t hit the bridge itself, but Berdly was right - at this speed, landing in the water would be just as fatal as hitting solid cement. Even if they twisted into a dive to possibly survive the impact, there was no guarantee that they’d be able to swim to the surface. Not with their muscles stiff and aching from the electric shock.

Web wings it was, then. They were prototypes, not thoroughly tested yet, just something Berdly had been tinkering with when he came over to Kris’s house to hang out and play video games. But right now, they were the only chance Kris had.

They would need to time this just right. They waited until they were nearly level with the bridge in front of them, and then pressed a button on their costume’s belt.

From their armpits to their wrists, thick, aerodynamic wings extended from hidden compartments, like miniaturized versions of a paraglider’s sails. The wind caught them, and Kris pulled up out of their dive just in time to soar under the bridge, skimming the surface of the water.

Holy crap. They could fly.

“Yes!” Berdly squawked in their ear. “A magnificent save! I can’t believe that actually worked, I thought you were dead for sure!”

Anyone else probably still would have been, Kris thought. They were soaring through the air at an uncontrollably fast rate, but with their strength and their webs, they could handle a rough landing.

“Hold your applause,” Kris said, pulling their arms up and catching an air current to curve up and around in an arc back towards the bridge. Below them, they could see Hippo stampeding past the end of the bridge and away into the city, his arms laden with stolen bags of money from the convoy they’d been robbing. “We’re not done yet.”

Briefly Kris scanned the skies for any signs of Condor, fearful of a sneak attack, but their spider-sense was quiet and the bird monster was nowhere in sight. He must have retreated, confident enough in their death to not stick around and

confirm it. His mistake. Boy would he be surprised when they tracked him down using the spider-tracer they'd slipped onto his wing.

"I'm going after Hippo," they told Berdly, diving after the escaping villain. They retracted the web wings with another press of a button, switching back to the more familiar speed and control of web-slinging as they neared buildings again. "If I lose sight of him, cross reference his trajectory with Maps data and keep me on course."

"Will do," Berdly said. "But I doubt you'll have trouble following his trail. Look at him knocking cars aside like tin cans! He's going to get someone killed!"

"Not if I can help it."

Kris swung through the city, arcing through the air and zipping around corners, until they were nearly on top of Hippo. They dived and swung low, as close as they could, then let go of the web-line and launched themselves directly onto his back. "Hey, buddy! Surprise!"

"Spider-Human!" Hippo roared in a thick accent, though he kept right on running. Unlike his partner in crime, Hippo was an actual hippo, as bulky and strong as any monster Kris had ever met. The armored suit that covered him from head to toe didn't make matters any better.

They were reluctant to start tearing bits off the armor after what had happened with Condor, so instead they threw a rope of webbing around Hippo's beefy neck like reins on a horse and stood upright on his back, trying to steer the supercriminal's rampage away from fleeing civilians. He was doing an incredible amount of property damage, but there was nothing to be done about that - more important to ensure no one was hurt.

"I like the new 'fit,'" Kris yelled in his ear as they clung to the villain's back. "Very 'Iron Monster' of you. But that doesn't look like Starktech. Where'd you get it?"

"Same place you got all your leetle gadgets," Hippo grunted. "The Tinkerer!"

"Tinkerer?" Kris gasped. "No way! I thought they only supplied tech to superheroes." They'd indeed had a few dealings with that old cat, and found them eccentric and sometimes unnerving, but they'd thought the inventor was on the right side.

"That is because you are naive child, Spider-Pest. Tinkerer is a businessmonster. They do not care about 'heroes' and 'villains,' only profit. Money is only thing that matters."

"Speaking of which, I think you've got something there that doesn't belong to you." Kris had steered Hippo correctly, because they were nearing the bank, the one that the ambushed convoy had been making a delivery to in the first place. As they drew nearer, Kris took the web-reins with one hand and, with the other, shot a web to snatch Hippo's stolen money bags right out of his hands.

With a flick of their wrist, they tossed the bags right into the arms of the bank's baffled security guards. "Don't spend it all in one place!"

"Stupid spider," Hippo sneered, picking up speed and running directly towards the bank. "If I cannot rob convoy, I will go directly to source."

"Ah ah ah," Kris chided, and with a punch to the side of the head and a tug on the webline around Hippo's throat, they redirected him to turn and barrel down the street in the other direction. "You've had enough robbery for one day. Leave some for the next costumed criminal, it's only polite."

"Kris," Berdly interjected, "I'm seeing a construction site just ahead of you on the map. Good place for a showdown, to keep civilians out of harm's way."

"I see it," Kris confirmed. "Heading there now."

They steered Hippo down the street and directly through the construction site's fencing, jumping up into the air to avoid getting knocked off his back. Construction workers scattered, yelping in surprise. "Sorry people! I'll do my best not to wreck whatever you're building here!"

Only there wasn't much to wreck; No skeleton of girders erected yet, just a big empty lot. And then they saw a golden opportunity dead ahead: A cement truck was in use, filling a large hole in the ground with liquid cement. Eventually the foundation of some building-to-be, but in the short term, a useful trap.

"Ladies and gentlethens, we've reached the last stop on the Hippo Express. Make sure you collect all your luggage before disembarking," Kris quipped, and then they steered Hippo towards the cement and leapt off his back. "Mind the gap - oh, oops, too late!"

The criminal tried to halt his momentum when he saw what was coming, but it was indeed too late for him. He barreled forward and fell right into the hole, yelling curse words the whole way.

Kris took a second to catch their breath before crouching down at the edge of the pit and looking in. Hippo was floundering in waist-high cement, panicking as he struggled to wade through the thick, sticky substance. It was better than any webbing at slowing him down. "Spider! You have to pull me out of here, I am too heavy! I will sink!"

"Relax, you big baby," Kris said. "It's not even that deep. You're not gonna drown, but good luck getting out of there before the cops show up."

"You tricked me! When I get my hands on you, I'll crush you in my jaws! I'll snap you in two!"

"Uh-huh. But hey, before you do that, you wanna tell me who financed that fancy, useless new suit of yours? I know you don't have that kind of cash yourself, or else you wouldn't have to resort to stealing. So who's your sponsor?"

Hippo's massive mouth twisted into a mean-spirited smile. "Oh, he is not going to be pleased with you, little spider. Nobody crosses Kingpin of Crime and lives

to tell story.”

Kris’s eyes widened with surprise. “You’re working for Kingpin?”

“I should maybe not have told you that. But it will not matter. You will be dead soon. I only regret I will not be one to kill you, stupid bug.”

“Arachnid,” Kris corrected. “And I’m not stupid. I’ll have you know I’m a solid B student!”

Berdly’s voice crackled onto the intercom. “Did he say Kingpin? As in the very same elusive, mysterious crime boss that you’ve been trying to bring down for months? Maybe this guy can finally tell you who and where Kingpin is!”

Kris shook their head. “He won’t know anything, he’s just the hired muscle. And he wouldn’t tell me even if he did. But maybe his friend will be more useful.” They pulled up a holographic display from one of their wrist cuffs, showing a miniature map of the city on which a bright dot was moving: The spider-tracer on Condor.

Sirens wailed from down the street as the police finally closed in. Kris spared one more parting glance to make sure Hippo wasn’t going anywhere, and then quickly tagged a construction crane with a pair of web lines, launched themselves into the air, and took off swinging. “Come on, Berdly. Time to see where Condor goes to hang up his wings.”

And there went the rest of the school day. They really hoped Noelle wouldn’t mind letting them copy her notes again.

It didn’t take Kris long to catch up to Condor. Though the villain had gotten a head start while they’d been wrapping things up with Hippo, the spider-tracer signal led them unerringly to an abandoned warehouse along the waterfront.

“I suggest a stealthy approach,” Berdly chirped in their ear. “Who knows what dangers await within those unassuming walls?”

“Roger that,” Kris said, rolling their eyes as they let go of a webline above the warehouse, did a flip in midair to arrest their momentum, and landed lightly on the roof. “I’ll do a little recon.”

“You know, this would have been a perfect moment to use my soon-to-be-patented Stealth Suit,” Berdly prattled. “If I could only figure out how to effectively splice in the chameleon DNA without it losing its pattern-changing properties...”

Kris crouched low, crawling on all fours towards a skylight that had been left cracked slightly open. “Did you ask Noelle?”

“What?” Berdly said, sounding genuinely confused. “Why would I ask Noelle?”

“Noelle’s good at science stuff.”

Berdly scoffed. “Noelle’s main field of study is engineering, Kris. That is very different from the bioengineering research in which I have chosen to specialize. Which you would know, if you were a respected Gastcorp Intern like myself. Or, for that matter, if you could stay awake through a single science class.”

“Well, forgive me if I’ve got more important things to do than play mad scientist with you and Noelle,” Kris said. Sometimes they wished Berdly had never discovered their secret identity. Then again, they might have gone mad if they’d had to go the past couple years without a friend to share their secret with, and they had to hand it to Berdly: As much as he had a big beak, he hadn’t betrayed their confidence yet. And he had his moments of brilliance, too. The web-wings he’d come up with had saved their ass today.

“Obviously I agree that your, ahem, extracurricular activities are important,” Berdly chattered, “or I would not be here, loyally assisting you in carrying the great burden of responsibility through thick and thin! I’m merely attempting to insinuate that maybe if you put a little bit more of that superhuman energy towards the equally heroic pursuit of knowledge, then perhaps you might have more than a mere layperson’s understanding of the minutiae of -”

He went on like that for a while longer, but Kris had stopped listening. Because as they peered down through the ajar skylight, they spotted their target amidst the tarp-covered boxes and cobwebbed shadows of the warehouse.

“I’ve got eyes on the Condor,” they said, cutting Berdly off.

“One second, patching back into your eyepiece feed. The connection keeps cutting in and out, I think my wi-fi’s acting up again. Okay, yeah, I see him. What’s he doing down there?”

Condor had retracted his artificial wings but was still wearing his suit, pacing back and forth. The supercriminal looked almost anxious.

“Looks like he’s waiting for someone,” Kris said. A moment later, they saw Condor freeze and turn around. “Hang on, I think someone’s coming.”

“I can’t see who it is from this angle,” Berdly said. “Can you get closer?”

Kris eyed the cracked-open skylight; it looked like there was just enough space to squeeze through, although it would be a tight fit. “I’m gonna try. One sec.”

Carefully, they slipped feet-first through the crack between roof and frame, hanging from the underside of the glass with one hand until they could THWIP their way with a webline onto one of the beams in the rafters. From there they could eavesdrop on the meeting below, safely hidden in the shadows.

A figure strolled into view: A short skeleton monster dressed in a very small tailored black suit and tie. He was flanked by a pair of much taller mobsters with guns.

"Condor," the skeleton said, spreading his arms wide and smiling a grin that revealed a mouth of filed, pointy teeth. "Can't help but notice your hands are kinda empty there. You were supposed to bring us money, remember? Or did you forget how robberies work?"

"That meddling pest Spider-Human interfered," Condor said. "It wasn't my fau-"

"Save your breath," the skeleton interrupted. "The boss already knows all about it. It was on live TV, birdbrain. Whole city got to see you fly away with your tailfeathers between your legs."

"I left Spider-Human falling to their death!" Condor objected. "Hippo was supposed to finish the job. If he's not here, then the blame falls on him."

"Yeah, well," the skeleton shrugged, "the spider kid's still very much alive, and they busted Hippo. So the screw-up was yours, pal."

"Just let me get another shot at Spider-Human and I'll make it up to Kingpin. I'll tear them limb from limb next time!"

"Hmm," the skeleton hummed. "Let's talk about 'next time,' why don't we? Kingpin isn't usually a big second chances kinda guy."

Condor took a step forward. The tall, wiry bird monster towered over the skeletal henchman. "If Kingpin wanted to intimidate me, he should have come himself instead of sending a 5-foot-nothing bag of bones. You don't scare me."

"4-foot-11," the skeleton corrected with a lazy grin. "And the boss is a busy man. Too busy to concern himself with losers. But if you need a little extra convincing..."

Without warning, one of the skeleton's eyes began to glow a bright blue, and a second later Condor floated a few feet into the air. Kris thought for a moment that he was flying away, but his wings were still retracted, and he was just floating there, flailing his arms and legs but unable to get down.

Berdly gave a loud gasp that was thankfully only audible to Kris. "Woah! Telekinesis!"

"You're a goddamn super!" Condor exclaimed. "Exactly who the hell are you supposed to be?"

The skeleton lowered Condor until their heads were level with each other, and then grinned that smile full of pointed teeth directly in Condor's face. "Call me Tombstone."

Condor gulped. "What...what are you going to do to me?"

"Nothin', buddy, nothin'." Tombstone spread his arms in a conciliatory gesture and Condor abruptly fell a few feet onto the ground with a startled "oof!"

While Condor picked himself up, shaking with rage, Tombstone continued, "Boss still has a use in mind for you. A chance to redeem yourself. Maybe even a

rematch with Spider-Human if you're lucky. How does that sound?"

Condor glared at him. "What's the job?"

"There's this event at the NHU campus at 8 tomorrow night. Big debate between the mayoral candidates. Kingpin's gonna crash the party, send a message. He wants you as his eyes in the sky, making sure no pesky superheroes show up to intervene. Think you can handle playing guard dog - or should I say, guard bird?" He winked.

Condor clenched a fist, but all he said was, "I'll be there."

"Wonderful, buddy, wonderful. This is a rare opportunity for you, so don't let us down again. No one gets a third chance from the Kingpin." He turned and started to walk away before pausing to add over his shoulder, "Don't forget, we know where that granddaughter of yours roosts. What was her name again? Martlet, right? Such a pretty little birdy she is..."

He signaled to his armed flunkies. "Awright, boys, let's roll." And then Tombstone sauntered away, calm as could be.

Condor stood there for a moment, seething, and then he extended his wings and took off out the open warehouse doors and up into the sky.

Berdly's voice crackled to life again. "You're not going after them?"

Kris dropped from the rafters and shot a webline at the ceiling, swinging down and towards the exit. "They can wait. Busting henchmen and hired help won't stop whatever Kingpin's planning at the debate. And I have to stop it, Berdly. My dad's going to be on that stage!"

"I thought you hated your dad."

"Mom might, but I don't." Kris shot a pair of weblines at the top of a streetlight and tugged hard, bouncing off it like a springpad and launching himself into the air and towards the waiting buildings of the city. "He may not be in my life much anymore, but he's still my dad. I don't want anything to happen to him. Besides, Noelle's mom will be there too. She kinda sucks but I can't let her get hurt. Noelle has been through enough already."

"Okay, I get the point. Let's go be heroes!"

"Only problem is, if Condor's gonna be waiting to intercept, I won't be able to just swing on in. I'll need to approach undercover. Hey, Berdly...you think I could pass for a college student, right?"

Berdly scoffed. "A freshman, perhaps. The smallest freshman in the school. A tiny, baby-faced, just out of high school smallfry little newb-"

"So that's a yes then," Kris interrupted. "Cool cool cool. I guess I'm getting political and attending the debate tomorrow. Next thing you know I'll be voting and everything."

By the time they had finished with the day's heroism it was too late to return to school, but Kris figured they had better return home before they were missed. They usually left school before their mother, while she stayed behind to wrap up administrative tasks at the end of the day. They'd lost a lot of time fighting villains and tracking Condor, but maybe if they hurried, they could still get home first and pretend like they'd been there the whole time.

That hope was dashed when they arrived home, using their new web-wings to glide over the low rooftops, and spotted their mom's car in the driveway. They would have bet good money that they had some missed calls from her as well; one downside to wearing their costume was a lack of pockets, so they usually left their phone behind in a backpack stashed on a rooftop for later retrieval. They hadn't thought to check it between grabbing their stuff and hurrying home.

They landed lightly in the alley on the side of the house, quickly changed out of their costume, and made their way around to the front door. All the while they were quickly thinking up excuses.

"Hey, Mom, I'm home!" Kris called as soon as they unlocked the door and stepped inside. "Sorry I didn't call, I went to Berdly's place after school to go over my notes from class, since he was out sick today, and I forgot to charge my phone and -"

"That is enough, Kris," their mother's voice said from the kitchen. "You do not need to lie to me."

Kris stiffened, hesitating for a moment before following her voice into the house. She sounded more serious than usual. What had she found out? What would they say if...if she knew about...

"Mom?" Kris questioned. Toriel was seated at the dining room table, hands folded in front of her, like she'd been waiting for them to get home. "Everything okay?"

"How about you tell me, my child," Toriel said. She motioned for them to sit, which Kris did, a knot of trepidation growing in their stomach. "You were not in class this afternoon."

Of course she had noticed their absence. Not much got past EMH's principal.

Excuses started to spring to Kris's lips. None of them truthful, but a couple years of living a double life had made a practiced liar out of them. They didn't like it, but it was a necessary skill.

But Toriel didn't give them time to get a lie out. "It was because of that girl, was it not? You left school early to avoid another confrontation with her."

Kris blinked, caught off guard. "Um. What girl?"

Toriel shook her head sadly. "Kris, you do not have to hide it from me anymore. Noelle told me everything. And you missed some...excitement at school today."

She began to recount the story of Noelle's fight with Susie in the hall and Susie's subsequent suspension. Kris listened with a growing feeling of shame in their gut. They knew it had been a mistake to show Noelle their injuries, to lie and say the bruises came from Susie. But it had felt good to have her worry about them, to have a friend to remind them that they weren't invincible. They gave so little thought to their own safety these days that it had felt comforting to know that Noelle cared about them.

But they had also trusted her to keep their secrets, even the ones that weren't true. Apparently that had been too much to ask of her; their friend was honest to a fault.

When Toriel had finished telling the story, she stood up from the table and approached them. "If you are willing, Kris, I would like to see for myself."

Kris hesitated. The bruises had been healing quickly, like all their injuries seemed to do since they got their powers, but there were still striking blooms of purple and yellow on their pale skin. It was too late to pretend the injuries had never happened, but how could they explain the real causes of those marks? They couldn't think of any more convincing lie, nor any explanation for why they had told Noelle a story that wasn't true.

With a sigh, they lifted their sweater, avoiding their mom's gaze. Her sharp inhale and the uncharacteristic harshness in her voice told them everything. "Suspension is letting that girl off too easily. I will be recommending expulsion to the school board, at a minimum! She should be in juvenile detention for this!"

"What? No," Kris objected, "Mom, come on, it's okay. I don't want to press charges or whatever. It's enough that I don't have to worry about her at school for a little while."

And that *was* a relief, despite the guilt they felt for their hand in it. Susie's punishment may have been bolstered by their lie, but she *did* throw a punch at Noelle, and no one had made her do that. Kris had known for a while now that Susie was on thin ice, so it was easy enough to assume that if she hadn't been suspended for this, something else would have been the final straw eventually.

They also knew that Noelle had an inexplicable soft spot for the violet dragoness, but as much fun as it was to tease her about her crush, they'd always worried that Noelle's determination to make nice with everyone would one day backfire on her. Kris had tangled with enough bad people to know that sometimes they had to be stopped before they could be rehabilitated - if such a thing was ever possible. Susie may have been just a bully and not a supervillain, but every villain started somewhere. Wasn't it better that she get a reality check now before she could continue down a violent path?

Maybe this was for the best. Maybe the accidental consequences of their dishonesty would save Noelle some grief in the long run. It could be just one more falsehood on the long list of necessary lies they told to protect the people they loved.

Their inner conflict must have shown on their face, because Toriel's anger softened and the next thing Kris knew, they were being pulled into the warm, furry embrace of their mother's arms. "Oh, Kris," she said gently. "You do not need to be afraid anymore. Now that I know what is going on, I will make sure you are safe at school. Just please, the next time you are in trouble, do not hesitate to tell me. You do not have to fight all your battles alone."

Kris wished very much that that were true. They wanted to believe in a world where the scariest thing was Susie, where problems that were too big for them could be handed off to adults and they never had to lie to anyone they loved. But they knew better.

"Thanks, Mom," they said, returning her hug with a half-hearted squeeze, so she wouldn't notice how strong they really were. "I know."

Chapter 7: Whatever a Spider Can

Kris was even quieter than usual at school the next day. They didn't even look up from their desk when Noelle greeted them before class started. "Morning, Kris! Where'd you go after lunch yesterday? You, uh, probably saw the video going around..."

But Kris said nothing. Maybe they were getting in a quick nap before class; it was sometimes hard to tell if they were awake or not.

As Ms. Alphys bustled in and began the day's lesson, Noelle couldn't help but keep stealing glances over her shoulder at Kris. By now it was clear they were awake, unless they had learned to copy down lecture notes in their sleep. But still they didn't acknowledge her, didn't catch her eye when they raised their head to look at the blackboard.

Eventually she gave up and passed a note to them instead. They didn't take it from her hand behind her chair like usual, so she had to wait until the teacher wasn't looking to twist around in her seat and push the paper onto their desk.

The note read simply, *You okay?*

Noelle waited for several long minutes, trying to pay attention to Alphys and resisting the temptation to look behind her and see if Kris was writing back or ignoring her.

Finally she felt something poke her shoulder, and turned around to take the crumpled paper back from them. They had added only one line: *We need to talk.*

What about? Noelle wrote back quickly, but Kris didn't pass the note to her again for the rest of the class, leaving her to wonder what they had meant.

She was so annoyed by this that when the bell rang, she hurried out of the classroom without looking at them. If they wanted to talk to her so badly, they would follow her.

And sure enough, that's exactly what they did. Kris caught up to her at her locker as she went through the motions of her textbook-swapping routine. "Noelle."

"Oh, now you're talking to me?" Noelle said, shutting her locker a little more forcefully than she'd intended to. After what had happened yesterday though, the last thing she wanted was another fight, and especially not with Kris, so she softened her tone and added, "What did you want to talk about?"

"Susie."

The sound of that name made Noelle compulsively look over her shoulder, and she felt an odd mixture of relief and regret to find the hallway free of scaly bullies. The atmosphere at EMH had noticeably changed since Susie's suspension; the students seemed a bit more relaxed today, like a subtle weight

had been lifted. One less thing to worry about, one fewer person to spend your days avoiding. No one really seemed sorry that she was gone. Except maybe for Bratty and Catty, but Noelle didn't think either of them would be lining up to be her friend now, so she wasn't about to ask their feelings on the matter.

"I guess you heard what happened, then," Noelle sighed.

"Heard everything from my mom," Kris said, then added pointedly, "Everything that she heard from *you*."

Noelle had seen this conversation coming, and had spent some time thinking about how she wanted to explain it to them. "Look, I know you asked me not to tell anyone, but I couldn't just stand by and let -"

"Save your breath," Kris said. They didn't raise their voice, but there was a sharpness to their tone, an unusual assertiveness, that stopped Noelle cold. "I know why you did it, Noelle. You still shouldn't have."

Noelle kept her voice low like theirs, not wanting to cause a scene for the second time in as many days. "What was I supposed to do? Just stand by and not stick up for you?"

"Yes," Kris said firmly. "Because I can *take care of myself*, Noelle. I told you something in confidence because you asked, not because I needed your help."

Noelle winced, trying not to show how much that remark stung. All she had wanted to do was protect them. But what good was she to anybody if even her best friend didn't want her help?

"Kris," she tried, "I'm sorry I broke my word. But you're my friend. It's only natural for me to want to help you."

"You're right. It was my fault for putting you in that position. I should have remembered that you're not someone who can lie or keep secrets. You're too good for that."

"Uh, thanks?" She wasn't sure if they were complimenting her or pointing out a flaw. Did they think she was a better or more truthful person than them? If only they knew what big things she was keeping to herself. She wasn't sure why she hadn't confided in Kris about everything going on with her yet, but this didn't seem like the time to bring it up.

"I, um, I still don't understand why you didn't want anyone to know about Susie, though..." she said hesitantly.

"I know. That's the problem."

Noelle looked down at their unreadable expression, waiting for them to elaborate. When they didn't, she added awkwardly, "Um, so then...are we good?"

"Yes. I forgive you," Kris said. But they sounded tired, like dealing with her was exhausting. Even though it was an olive branch, it made Noelle feel small and sad.

"I'm...I'm sorry, Kris," she said again. It felt a bit pathetic to still be apologizing after being forgiven, but she didn't know what else to say.

"It's okay," Kris said with a resigned shrug. "But the next time you think I'm keeping something to myself, Noelle...just trust me, and don't pry."

It hurt to think that Kris no longer trusted her to keep a secret, so she nodded quickly and eagerly. "Okay, Kris, I won't be so nosy anymore. I promise."

She would have preferred to have no secrets between them at all. But maybe that was too much to ask, even from her best friend. Her own sister was keeping things from her, after all, and she hadn't confided in anyone yet about the weird stuff going on with her body since that spider bite, either, not even Dr. Gaster, the one person who might actually know what it meant. Maybe that was just part of life: Everyone had something to hide.

Noelle returned home from school to two unexpected discoveries: One, Dess was home, as evidenced by the loud metal music emanating from her room upstairs, the closed door doing little to muffle the noise. And secondly, her mom was home as well, a rare occurrence for 4 o'clock on a Tuesday.

"Noelle!" Carol called from her bedroom over the cacophony of guitars and screaming vocals. "Come in here for a moment, will you?"

Noelle was surprised that her mother had even heard her hoofsteps on the stairs over the noise. She wondered what her mom wanted. Carol's busy schedule meant that they hadn't had time yet to talk about the incident with Susie the day before, and Noelle wasn't looking forward to a lecture about staying out of trouble at school lest she end up like her sister. But there was no avoiding whatever this was about, so she opened the door and stepped inside.

"Close the door after you, please," Carol instructed, still having to raise her voice just to be heard. She was sitting in front of her vanity mirror, applying eyeliner. Her hair was perfectly curled, and she wore a red blouse with a bow collar, paired with tight black pants - a stylish mix of formal and businesslike.

Noelle closed the door, blocking out the background noise by a small degree. "It's nice having Dess home for a change," she said, with a deliberate balance of sincerity and sarcasm.

Carol gave her daughter's reflection in the mirror a long-suffering look. "I tried asking her to turn it down. Her bedroom door is locked, and she won't talk to me."

Noelle winced, recalling Dess's battered face. "I'm sure she's just being angsty. That's not really music you listen to when you're in a good mood." Outside the

room, the singer screamed something about ‘the dust of the Angel.’ It sounded like, Noelle guessed, Ten Inch Talons? Maybe?

Seeing her mother’s scowl, she decided to change the subject. “You look nice. Are you going out somewhere?”

“Yes, the gubernatorial debate is tonight, at the university,” Carol explained. “Did you forget? I’m up in the polls after the explosion at Gastcorp and I need to capitalize on the public sympathy. Show them that I’m not stopping for anything.”

“That...makes sense,” Noelle said, although inwardly she questioned the logic of supporting a candidate just because they had happened to be a bystander in an accident. Especially when they’d been saved by a hero whose vigilantism they were outspokenly against, a fact that she assumed her mom would be conveniently glossing over.

Still, if there was one thing that Carol had taught her about politics, it was that how people perceived you was just as important as what you actually did. Sometimes more so.

So she put on an optimistic tone and told her mom, “I’ll be sure to watch it on TV while I study. I bet you’ll do great! Mr. Dreemurr doesn’t have a chance against you.”

“Asgore is well-spoken,” Carol conceded, “but politically, he’s all wrong for this city. I hope to expose that tonight. Anyways, that’s not why I wanted to speak to you.” She put the finishing touches on her makeup and turned around to face Noelle. “I got a call just before leaving my office from Norman Gaster.”

“Oh!” Noelle said, abruptly having to change mental gears when she realized this wasn’t about school. “I got a call from him yesterday too.”

“So I hear. I also heard you brushed him off.”

Noelle opened her mouth indignantly. “That’s... that’s not how I would characterize it. He tried to schedule an appointment with me and I told him I would have to get back to him about it because I’m really busy this week. Which is true, I have exams.”

“Yes, I know you do,” Carol said coolly. “But Noelle, I will have failed you as a parent if I haven’t instilled in you the ability to do two things at once. High school is important, obviously, but you also need to be laying the groundwork for what comes after. Procrastinate too much on those opportunities and you could end up...well.” She nodded her head towards the door, and the racket from Dess’s room beyond it.

“I’m going to call him back soon,” Noelle promised. “I just need time to focus on studying for my exams first.”

Carol held her gaze for a long moment. “Very well. But I told him you would be in touch by the end of the week, so please, don’t put it off for much longer.”

She frowned a little despite herself. "You made promises for me?"

"Noelle," her mother said, arching a formidable eyebrow. "Noelle. Gaster is not the kind of man who is accustomed to being kept waiting."

Noelle held her tongue and bit back the response she *wanted* to say: "*So I guess we're only acknowledging that we both almost died because of that guy when it's politically convenient?*"

She knew she couldn't avoid Dr. Gaster forever. And heck, maybe going to Gastcorp would help her get some answers. But it felt like some part of her would always associate Gastcorp with danger now. Maybe that explained why she felt so uncomfortable about the thought of going back there.

But she didn't express any of that out loud. Instead, she looked down at her hooves and said, "Yes, ma'am. I understand." This was usually the fastest route to ending a conversation with her mother.

"Good," Carol said. "Now I really have to be leaving soon. There's dinner in the fridge. Have fun studying." She pinched the bridge of her nose and added, "If you can concentrate on it. Maybe your sister will listen if you're the one asking her to keep it down."

"I think I'll just take my textbooks and study outside for a while," Noelle said. "It's a nice day out."

She left her mother to finish getting ready, and though she briefly considered knocking on Dess's door, she decided against it. She still hadn't gotten the answers that Dess had promised her, but she knew better than to interrupt her sister when Dess was in an industrial rock mood. Punk rock like Green Evening or The Horny Handguns? Hell yeah, hit her up. TIT or Monster Manson? Keep your distance or she might snap at you.

So it was that 10 minutes later, Noelle was outside in the shade of the backyard gazebo, armed with textbooks and snacks. The only problem was, she couldn't concentrate. She kept reading the same paragraphs over and over without absorbing the information. It wasn't Dess's music that was distracting her, although that was still very audible coming out of her bedroom window on the back wall of the house. Noelle just had too much on her mind to focus on homework.

With a sigh, she concluded that she simply wouldn't be able to get anything done until she had tested a theory that had been nipping at the back of her brain ever since the 'sticking to the ceiling' incident yesterday. Part of her had been afraid to try replicating the experience - she still didn't understand how it worked, and what if she got stuck dangling from a ceiling forever?

But another part of her was excited to test just what she was capable of doing now.

She unzipped her backpack, withdrew and strapped on her 'webshooters,' and glanced around. Her mom had left a while ago, Dess was home but almost

always kept her curtains closed because she liked her room dark, and the security guards only patrolled the back yard after sundown, to maintain the family's privacy. All of which meant that nobody would be likely to see her out here.

Noelle shot a web line up to the ceiling of the gazebo, climbed up it hand over hand, and then cautiously put one palm flat against the sloped ceiling. And then she let go of the web with the other hand.

She should have fallen a few feet to the ground, but she didn't. Instead, she hung there from one arm.

"Holy crap..."

Aside from being impossible, it should have put a tremendous strain on her muscles, but she felt strong and more than capable of supporting her weight like that. Still, she attached her other hand to the ceiling as well. Then, in a moment of sudden inspiration, she clenched her core muscles and all-too-easily swung her legs up to the ceiling as well. As soon as her hooves touched the surface, they clung to it.

"Woah," Noelle gasped. She was now hanging upside down from all fours in complete defiance of the laws of gravity and normal reindeer biology.

"I'm like Spider-Human," she realized, excitement dawning on her. "I...I have *powers*." Weird, sticky powers, but powers nonetheless!

She had to test the theory further. But first she had to get down. Following the superhero train of thought, she aimed downwards with her web-shooters and fired a line of webbing from one gazebo pillar to the opposite one, forming a makeshift tightrope below her. Then, more by instinct than conscious control, she released her hold on the ceiling and dropped onto the wire.

She was expecting to miss and fall on her face, but not only did the thin strand hold her weight, it was surprisingly easy to balance on. She should have toppled and fallen over, but she barely even wobbled before finding her equilibrium. Noelle slowly stood up on her hooves, her arms outstretched for balance, and ran from one end of the rope to the other, laughing in astonishment at how easy it felt, like she was some kind of natural-born circus acrobat.

"Okay," she said to herself, hopping down to the ground, "time for step 2."

A minute later, she had clambered up the trunk of a tree at the edge of the woods surrounding the property (much more easily than when she'd been a little kid climbing trees with Dess) and was sitting in the upper branches, staring down the tree opposite her and trying to psych herself up.

"This is what Spider-Human does, Noelle," she told herself. "You can't be like them if you can't *swing*."

The trees were high enough, the branches strong. There was nothing stopping her but her own fear. But it turned out throwing yourself into the open air and relying on a webline and your own momentum to keep yourself from falling looked a lot easier than it felt.

“How do they do this with *skyscrapers*?” Noelle grumbled. Her heart was beating so fast, and she hadn’t even done anything yet except climb a stupid tree.

Okay, she was just going to go for it. Less looking, more leaping. She could do this!

Noelle jumped forwards into thin air, screamed, and blindly shot a webline at the treetop across from her. By some miracle she caught a branch, and she held on for dear life, screaming all the while, as the ground sped up to meet her and then dropped away.

She swung upwards in an arc, just like Spider-Human, and for a moment her fear was replaced with a jubilant, soaring adrenaline.

Then she saw the other tree trunk rushing up towards her.

Noelle screamed again, let go of the webline, and flew towards the tree. She twisted at the last second and kicked off of the trunk hooves-first, bouncing back into open air in the other direction. This time she kept her wits together long enough to actually aim, and snagged a branch with another webline.

The ground rushed up again, too fast and too close. She’d lost too much altitude. “Crap crap crap crap crap!”

Her hooves touched the ground and she let go of the webline, first running and then tripping and tumbling antlers over heels to a halt.

“Ughhh...” Noelle groaned, finding herself lying on her back looking up at the distant treetops that she’d just been using as her personal playground and feeling an immense newfound appreciation for solid ground.

She didn’t feel hurt though, so she picked herself up and brushed twigs and leaves from her sweater. “Okay... I’m gonna call that a partial success.”

Having satiated her desire to risk breaking her neck for the moment, she walked back out of the woods. She should really get back to studying.

But there was still one more, slightly less dangerous thing she wanted to try...

So she snuck across the lawn to the side of the house, careful to pick a spot behind the tree that grew between her and Dess’s bedroom windows, out of sight of the security cameras. And then she began to climb. It was surprisingly easy, if a bit disorienting, to crawl up the wall at a sheer 90-degree angle using only her hands and hooves. Unlike with swinging from the trees, gravity was thrillingly powerless to stop her.

She had been intending to climb all the way to the roof, because she’d always wondered what the view would be like from up there, but had never been bold enough to climb that high in the tree branches. But she only got as high as Dess’s window before the pulse of her sister’s music suddenly stopped, bringing Noelle to a surprised halt along with it.

In the quiet, she tried not to panic. Though the curtains were drawn, Dess's window was open - if she were to poke her head out the window right now, she'd see Noelle clinging to the wall. She ought to keep climbing, get up to the roof fast, but before she could make herself move, she heard her sister's voice drifting out through the window.

"Yeah, it's me," Dess said curtly. "I thought we talked about you calling me on this phone. What if my mom was around?"

Curiosity overwhelmed Noelle. Sure, she knew it was wrong to eavesdrop, but if Dess wouldn't tell Noelle what was going on with her, then maybe she would just have to figure it out on her own. So she stayed where she was, and kept listening.

"Again?" Dess said. "After what happened on Sunday? I thought I told you -" She fell silent for a moment and then added, with a noticeable shift in tone like she was trying to sound polite through gritted teeth, "Yes, I know. No, I don't want that. Yes, I'll do it. When and where?"

Noelle crawled closer, straining to hear.

"8 o'clock *tonight*?" Dess said. "That's so soon! And you know I have to wait until dark. It'll take me a while just to get across town." A beat, then, "Fine, send a car, whatever. I'll leave as soon as the sun goes down. Just tell me what the job is."

There was a brief pause, and then Dess raised her voice so sharply that it almost made Noelle jump. "You've gotta be %#\$ing kidding me!" She quickly lowered her voice down to a hush and went on, "My own mother's debate? Seriously, after what happened last time? Stealing shit was one thing, but this wasn't part of the deal!

"Yeah, I know, the deal is whatever you say goes. But this... I'll never get away with it. Unless that's your plan. You're setting me up, aren't you?!"

"Easy for you to say. Not like you've ever done anything to earn my trust.

"...Really? Just this one last thing and then we're even?" Dess let out a bitter bark of laughter. "I don't think I believe you. But sure, okay, I guess I don't really have a \$*!%ing choice, do I? But I don't care what you threaten me with, 'cause if anything happens to my mom, or my sister, then I'm telling the cops everything. They can lock me up for the rest of my life for all I care, it'll be worth it if it brings you down with me.

"Yeah, yeah, hang up on me, you piece of shit. Angel, I hate you." There was a sudden clatter like something hitting the wall next to the window, and then the sound of Dess unleashing a torrent of profanity.

Unnerved, Noelle crawled across the wall over to her own bedroom window and slipped inside before Dess could catch her spying. Once in the safety of her room, she turned over the half of a conversation that she'd just heard in her head, trying to make sense of it. There were two main takeaways: Dess would be doing

something at their mother's debate tonight, and she would be doing it against her will.

Whatever Dess had gotten herself involved in, it sounded even more serious than Noelle had realized. She could just go over to Dess's room right now and confront her about it, demand answers, try to stop her...

But then, Dess might get hurt if she didn't do whatever the person on the phone had ordered her to do. Clearly, the blackmailer or whatever they were wasn't above getting violent. And it was obvious now that the only reason Dess had been keeping all this a secret from her was that she was trying to protect Noelle from someone dangerous. Someone who, from the sound of it, had already made threats against their family.

Noelle paced back and forth, trying to decide what to do. How was she supposed to know what the best choice was when she didn't have all the facts? What would a hero like Spider-Human do in this situation?

Well, there was only one obvious answer to that. They would go where the danger was, stop the bad guy's plan, and protect whoever needed protecting. Even if it was their sister who hadn't asked for their help.

She remembered what Kris had said to her at school. She had promised that she would stay out of things that weren't her business and not try to save people who hadn't asked for saving. Hadn't she already learned her lesson about butting into other people's affairs and making things worse?

Noelle leaned against the bedroom wall, digging her palms into her eyes, trying to clear her head and make a decision. Whatever she'd promised Kris, this was different - Dess was *family*, and she was clearly being targeted by someone much more dangerous than a school bully. And like Kris, December was too proud to ever ask for help. Surely respecting her sister's stubborn pride wasn't as important as keeping her safe. If something happened to Dess and Noelle could have prevented it...

She didn't want to even think about that. There was only one thing to do: Keep Dess from doing anything she would regret, whether she liked it or not. And to do that without accidentally making the situation worse, she needed more information. She needed to know what exactly Dess was being forced to do.

Noelle stood up, resolved to a course of action: she would wait until Dess left, then follow her.

But then she hesitated, mapping out the logic of just how she would do that. Even if she had powers now, she couldn't just go swinging around the city where anyone might see her. This was why heroes wore costumes. If she was going to watch over Dess like some superpowered guardian angel, then she would need a disguise.

A lightbulb went off in her brain, and a moment later she was digging around in her closet until she found what she was looking for: an old, half-forgotten

cosplay that she had made for a comics convention a few years back. She'd grown a bit since then, but...

Quickly, she stripped down to her underwear and pulled on the blue bodysuit and the mask, tying her hair back into a ponytail to fit (just barely) under the fabric. It was a bit short on the wrists and ankles, but it would do. The gap between the gloves and the arms was the perfect place for her web-shooters, anyways.

She looked at herself in the mirror through the holes in the mask's big white 'eyes.' Aside from her protruding antlers and tail, which stuck out of the holes she'd cut to accommodate them, she looked like the spitting image of a certain masked crime-fighter.

Look out, mystery villain, Noelle thought. You mess with one Holiday sister, you mess with both of them. I hope you're ready, because here comes the Spectacular Spider-Doe!

Noelle was finding this whole webslinging thing tricky to get the hang of, especially when trying to tail someone without being seen.

As soon as the sun had gone down, Dess had climbed out of her bedroom window and down the tree. Noelle, dressed in her homemade Spider-Human cosplay and waiting in the branches of a tree at the edge of the yard, had watched Dess head into the woods and followed her by running across web lines and jumping from tree to tree.

That part had been hard enough - she almost got spotted a couple times when she rustled the leaves a little too hard, but in the shadows, hidden by the web of branches, she'd managed to avoid detection. She had followed Dess all the way to the edge of their property by the front gate, where she'd watched her sister uncover a hidden bundle of something wrapped in plastic. Dess crouched down in the bushes out of sight, unwrapped the package, and began to change clothes, putting on a skintight leather catsuit and a white wig.

Noelle had to stifle a gasp when she recognized the outfit. Dess was the mystery woman from Gastcorp, the one who had tried to save her from the falling debris! But what had she been doing there? And what was she going to do at the debate?

Once changed, Dess concealed her normal clothes and lingered for a while, as though waiting for something. After a few minutes, a black unmarked van pulled up along the street, the engine idling as though it, too, were waiting for someone. Dess clambered over the fence and jumped down to the street. The van's windows were tinted, and Noelle couldn't see who was inside, but she watched as the door opened and her sister got in, and then the car began to drive away.

As soon as it rounded the corner, Noelle quickly swung down from the tree. She sprinted across the street to the nearest neighboring house and climbed up the

side as fast as possible, hauling herself onto the roof. From up there, she could see the van's lights disappearing around a corner.

Fortunately, it was easy enough for Noelle to follow from the rooftops; the homes in this neighborhood were all old, expensive houses like her family's, with plenty of big sloping roofs and tall fences to swing from and run along. It was like an enormous jungle gym, like the whole neighborhood was the obstacle course in one of the parkour videos that Dess liked to watch. The jumps between houses were scary at first, but there was no time to hesitate if she wanted to keep up, and she soon found that she could easily leap far enough to cross the gaps. Her sticky hooves also made it easier to clamber up and down the sloped rooftops without stumbling.

She would have been left far behind without her webs, and even then she had soon lost sight of the vehicle she was tailing. But that was okay - if it was going to the university then she knew the route it would likely take, and she could catch up with it when it got into the city where the traffic was thicker.

After a few blocks of swinging and leaping between houses, the residential neighborhood gave way to taller and denser brownstones and apartment buildings, and the rooftops became flatter and wider. This made it easier to leap from roof to roof, but far more frightening to navigate the urban jungle from that high above. Try as she might, she couldn't find the van again in the stream of traffic. It was hard to focus on such details below without making herself dizzy, because while the cars flowed through the streets like a river, Noelle was following a parallel track above them by *running along the sides of buildings and swinging through the open air twenty stories off the ground* while desperately trying not to scream or puke.

She really didn't know how Spider-Human did it. On the one hand, it was exhilarating. On the other, it was *terrifying*. The webbing held her weight just fine, and she realized after a while that there was a rhythm to it: fire and swing and release and fire again, one hand after the other, just physics and momentum. But that didn't stop her from feeling like she was constantly one wrong move away from splattering herself all over the street.

Fortunately, it wasn't that far from her house to the New Home University campus, especially when you could travel as the crow monster flew, without getting stuck in traffic. Before long, she had made it there in one piece and could pause to catch her breath and wait for her head to stop spinning.

As she took a moment to recover at the edge of campus, Noelle noticed a familiar unmarked van pull up by the side of the road. She stared, unable to believe her luck. She'd made good time, and tried to follow the same route the car would likely take, but she still hadn't really expected to beat it there.

But there Dess was, hopping out of the van. It squealed away down the street while she headed straight for a building that looked big enough to contain a lecture hall or two; Noelle assumed this was where the debate was being held. While Dess casually crept around the lawn to the back of the building, sticking to the shadows, Noelle followed from above and took up watch on the edge of the roof, tracking her sister's movements.

That was when Noelle spotted the group of men standing around the back entrance, smoking cigarettes and trying to look like they belonged there. Most were dressed in the dirty jumpsuits of some kind of maintenance workers, but among them was a short skeleton monster in a suit. And all of them were carrying poorly concealed guns strapped to their hips.

And Dess was headed their way. Noelle only had seconds to choose whether to watch on or intervene. So she chose.

Before Dess could round the corner of the building and meet up with the men with guns who were clearly waiting for her, Noelle made her move. She waited until Dess was right below her, then snagged her with a stream of webbing and quickly pulled her up onto the roof before she knew what was happening. Dess let out a half-stifled scream of surprise as her hooves left the ground. As soon as Noelle had finished hauling her onto the roof, she wrestled out of Noelle's grip.

"Stop, just wait!" Noelle tried to say, but Dess was already whirling around to face her. She had webbing stuck to her back and shoulders, but her arms were still free. That may have been a mistake, because she immediately grabbed Noelle by the side of the neck, pulled her to the ground and straddled her waist, her fist pulled back for a punch.

"Spider-Human?!" Dess exclaimed. But then she hesitated and poked at Noelle's antlers. "Wait...you're not Spider-Human. Who are you?"

"I'm, uh..." Noelle squeaked out, before clearing her throat and finishing, "I'm... Spider-Doe?"

Dess narrowed her single unswollen eye. "What the hell, Noelle?"

"What?! I'm not Noelle, I'm -" Noelle sighed, at a loss for words, and decided to quit while she was ahead. "You recognized my voice, didn't you?"

"I recognized that costume you made for NHC Comic-Con," Dess said. "What do you think you're doing out here playing superhero? Did you follow me all the way from the house?"

Noelle reached up and pulled her mask off, shaking her pinned-back golden hair loose. "Fine, you got me. I overheard your phone call earlier. Now can you let me up already?"

Slowly, Dess climbed off her and took a step back while Noelle got to her hooves. "I don't know how you managed to beat me here, but I have to get back down there, Noelle. You have no idea what you're messing with."

"Whatever you're here to do, Dess, I know you don't really want to! I can help you. Those monsters down there -"

"Aren't the kind of guys you stand up for a job," Dess finished. "It started out small, just robbing a few jewelry stores and stuff, but now..." She took a quick peek over the ledge of the roof, verifying that the mobsters were still waiting for her. "They'll probably do the job with or without me, but do you know what happens if I'm not there like I'm supposed to be?" She turned to face Noelle, a

mix of anger and resignation on her face, under the bruises and the mask around her eyes. "They'd come for you. For everyone I care about. I have to do it, do you understand? It's the only way to protect you."

"I can protect myself!" Noelle protested. "I can protect you too! I'm not helpless."

"You're not a superhero!" Dess fired back, stepping closer to Noelle. "You're a teenager in a costume, and if you keep sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, you're going to get yourself hurt." Her face softened, becoming sad for a moment. "Believe me, I would know."

"What..." Noelle inhaled sharply, pushing out the question that had been eating at her mind ever since overhearing that phone call. "What were you going to do to Mom in there?"

"Nothing!" Dess said, too quickly. She caught Noelle's reproachful gaze and glanced away. "Kingpin is planning to take hostages. He chose tonight because he wants the whole thing televised. He has demands that Mom can meet as mayor. If only to save her own hide." She looked back up at Noelle and added, "I got mad, after Gastcorp. Told Kingpin I wouldn't work for him anymore. I'm pretty sure forcing me to be involved in this tonight is his way of making a patsy out of me, taking me off the board. But whatever happens to me, even if I have to take the fall for all of it, I'll make sure no one gets hurt."

Noelle crossed her arms. "Like no one was hurt at Gastcorp?"

Dess flinched. "That was... a mistake. It was just supposed to be a distraction, just to knock out power to the building. I would never have sabotaged the reactor if I'd known it would explode like that."

Noelle sucked in a breath. "This has to stop, Dess. If it doesn't, someone really is going to get hurt, and I can't - I *won't* let you have that on your hands."

"Go home, Noelle. It's too late to stop now. And you can't stop me."

"I'm sorry, Dess," Noelle said, shaking her head sadly. Hiding her hands behind her legs, she subtly adjusted the knobs on the wristbands of her web-shooters, first one and then the other. "I'm really sorry, but that's not true."

She flung her arms out in front of her and pressed down on her palms. Twin globs of sticky adhesive shot out and landed on Dess's hooves, hardening as they made contact with the air.

Dess tried to move her legs, but she was already glued fast to the floor. "Noelle, what the f- mmmph!" Her protests were cut off by a thick gag of webbing covering her mouth. A second later, as Dess tugged at the strands of web on her face, Noelle fired another small length of webbing around her wrists, pinning them together.

"Don't freak out it's okay!" Noelle said in a rush. "It'll dissolve in about an hour or two, I just need to keep you from doing anything you'd regret."

Dess glared at her and muttered something that sounded vaguely like profanity.

"I'll - I'll call the police, okay?" Noelle said, pacing back and forth. "I'll call Undyne. They'll stop Kingpin's men, and they don't have to know you were involved. You haven't done anything yet."

Dess was still yelling at her, the sound muffled into unintelligible noise, and Noelle closed her eyes to shut it out, to think...

That was when she felt the tingle in her skull return, *hard*, a sudden pain like a migraine coming out of nowhere.

Acting on instinct, Noelle shoved her mask back down over her face and spun around, throwing a defensive arm in front of Dess and looking wildly around. But there was no one there - they were alone on the rooftop.

Too late, Noelle checked for danger in the one direction she hadn't looked yet: above her.

She had just enough time to see something huge and winged diving through the sky towards her. A heavy weight slammed into her from behind, knocking the wind from her lungs. Strong arms scooped her up by the armpits, and before she knew it, her hooves had left the ground as she was carried away into the air.

"Got you now, Spider-Human!" a man's voice crowed in her ear.

Noelle's stomach dropped, both from the sudden altitude and from recognition: The Condor. She was being attacked by a bonafide supervillain, and unlike him, she was very much incapable of flight. She tried to shout, to tell him that he had made a mistake, that he had the wrong person, but she couldn't catch her breath to get the words out.

The muffled sound of Dess screaming Noelle's name was lost in the whipping rush of wind as the campus fell away into the distance beneath her.

Chapter 8: A Civil Exchange of Ideas

Over the course of the debate, Kris had reached the conclusion that even when it involved your dad and your best friend's mom, politics was still really boring.

Part of the problem was that they didn't know who to root for: Carol was an annoying person and a thorn in their side as Spider-Human, but a decent mayor from what Noelle told them. And their dad was...their dad. They couldn't really picture Asgore in public office, and they didn't get why he was running in the first place. After spending the last few years since the divorce and his resignation from the police force expanding a local flower shop into a city-wide chain of Flower King home and garden stores, Asgore had positioned himself as a sort of down-to-earth businessman alternative to Carol's career politician. But wasn't it better to leave politics to people with government experience? As successful as their father had been, running a business and running a whole city sounded like two very different things to Kris.

Nor did Kris care much about jobs and economic growth and infrastructure and all that boring city management stuff. Sure, maybe their dad had a plan to reduce traffic congestion, but they had no plans to ever drive in New Home City. Not when webslinging was so much faster (and better for the environment too!).

The other reason they were having trouble focusing, of course, was that they were on alert for expected trouble. The venue was impressive: a huge, high-ceilinged lecture hall, the moon visible through a large glass window high up on the wall behind the stage. Kris had parked themselves way in the back by the upper doors, both so that Asgore and Carol would be unlikely to spot them in the crowd, and so that they could duck out to make a quick costume change at the first sign of danger.

However, there was one subject of discussion at the debate that they *were* actually interested in. And so their ears perked up and they sat up straight at the first mention of "costumed vigilantes."

"Mayor Holiday," the moderator said, "in your time in office you've had a record of supporting law enforcement. But your detractors have claimed that crime, and in particular super-powered crime, has increased in the past few years. How would you respond, and if reelected, how will you make our streets safer from costumed vigilantes and criminals? You have 60 seconds."

"Well I'd like to start by saying that this is an issue near and dear to my heart," Carol said. "No one is more motivated to stop crime than me. The tragedy that struck my family last year should never be allowed to happen to any other family in this city."

Kris made an annoyed grumble under their breath. They knew Carol must miss Rudy as much as anyone, but it was also just like her to use her late husband's memory to prop up her campaign.

"But as to your question about stopping super-powered crime in particular," Carol continued, "I am working to allocate additional funding to NHPD to train and equip officers to better handle super-powered threats. As the incident on the Monsterhatten Bridge just yesterday showed, this new class of criminal requires a new class of police in response. And although I'm not yet ready to announce the details, if all goes well, Gastcorp will be contracting with the city to provide technology to give our brave officers an edge in this fight."

"The same Gastcorp whose inventions blew up in your face last weekend?" Asgore cut in. "You will forgive me if that does not inspire confidence."

"Excuse me, Asgore," Carol said icily, "I wasn't done speaking."

"And I apologize, but if I could just say-"

Some heated crosstalk ensued, causing the moderator to raise their voice. "Mr. Dreemurr, you have 60 seconds to respond."

"Thank you." Asgore straightened his tie and cleared his throat. "As your former police chief, I understand how difficult it can be to *prevent* crime rather than merely *responding* to it. And while a strong response is indeed important, we can't simply wait around for super-criminals to plan and execute their next dastardly scheme and hope that we can catch them when they do. Half the time Spider-Human beats the police to the scene and only causes further chaos by interfering."

That's one word for it, Kris thought with a roll of their eyes.

"So what would you propose instead?" Carol said. "We're all ears."

"Now who's interrupting?" Asgore said with a patient smile. "But my proposal is simple: A zero-tolerance crackdown on super-crime - and yes, that includes so-called heroes like Spider-Human. We need to be treating these criminals the same way we would treat a serial killer: by using all available resources to determine their identities, track them down and apprehend them *before* they can strike again. It will take more than additional funding and equipment to meet the challenges facing our police officers: It will take major departmental reforms. Take the mob boss known as the Kingpin for example. Under Mayor Holiday, NHPD has arrested plenty of his flunkies, but is somehow no closer to identifying the man himself."

"Asgore, you know the department can't discuss details of an ongoing investigation," Carol chided. "You have my assurance that they are pursuing every available lead and -"

"And failing. Face it, Carol, NHPD isn't what it used to be. The mismanagement, the talent drain, the incompetence of Chief Undyne..."

"If you feel you could have done a better job," Carol snapped, "then perhaps you shouldn't have resigned."

A solemn look passed over Asgore's face. "You are right. I resigned from the force because I felt that I had done all the good I could there. But I have since

realized that I was underestimating my own capabilities. I want to make up for that mistake now, by serving this city as its mayor. I am determined to pull New Home out of its decline. And that starts with getting control of the criminal element that has run rampant under the current leadership. Because until we do -"

"Your time is up, Mr. Dreemurr," the moderator interjected. "Let's take this back to the Mayor for another ques-"

"Until we do, none of us are safe," Asgore barreled forward. "Until we unmask and apprehend them, these criminals could -"

"Mr. Dreemurr, you are over your allotted time."

"- strike anywhere at any moment."

Carol spoke up. "If I could be allowed to respond -"

Kris's spider-sense began to tingle. They stood, scanning the crowd for threats...

Just then, the moderator's attempts to restore order to the stage were interrupted by the doors at the top of the lecture hall bursting open. Kris jumped and spun around as a group of monsters with ski masks pulled over their faces stormed into the room. They were armed, pointing guns at the screaming crowd. More armed men filed in through the rear exits at the bottom of the room as well, marching casually up onto the stage and pointing their weapons at the two candidates, where the cameras could see them. Through the open doors below, Kris caught a glimpse of a security guard sprawled lifeless on the floor.

"Awright, everybody listen up," a short skeleton monster called out, strolling to the front of the gangsters with a gun in his hand. Though he was masked like the rest of his men, Kris recognized him from the warehouse earlier: the henchman called Tombstone. "Let's make this nice and simple - nobody does anything stupid, and nobody gets hurt."

"What is the meaning of this?" Carol demanded from her podium, her microphone distorting when she raised her voice.

Asgore protectively stepped closer to the mayor, putting an arm in front of her. "Carol, I think we should keep our cool here. These men look like serious customers."

But Carol ignored him, growling into her microphone, "This is an outrage! I don't know what you want, but New Home City does not negotiate with criminals."

"You may want to listen to your opponent there," Tombstone grinned. "This isn't a negotiation, honey. This is more of a 'you agree to whatever we say or your constituents start catching bullets' kind of situation. And it wouldn't be great for your poll numbers if you let that happen, now would it?"

While he paused to let the crowd take this in, Kris quickly scanned the room. All eyes were on the intruders, but the gangsters were blocking the only exits, and one of them had his gun trained directly on the rear of the crowd where Kris was standing. They had their costume on under their street clothes; all they needed

was a moment without any eyes on them to pull on their mask and quickly shed their sweater and jeans, but there was no way, at least for the moment, to slip away and make the change.

"Great," Tombstone said when the crowd's panic had been cowed into stillness. "Glad we're all on the same page. Now, my friends and I were watching this democratic exchange of ideas, and we're hearing a lot about super-powered this and super-criminals that, but we were thinking, what about the common criminal? What's the ordinary working-class crook's place in this new modern world?"

He strolled down the row of steps towards the stage, smiling all the way. "Well, we have a few 'recommendations' for our current and/or future mayors. Think of it as...a policy proposal." He casually cocked his gun and added, "Non-negotiable. Gonna hold you politicians to your word for a change."

Carol grit her teeth. "I'm making no promises, but go on, out with it. What are your demands?"

"For starters," Tombstone drawled, "you've got some of our boys in the slammer. We'd like to see their immediate release. We'll send your people the list of names."

"Absolutely out of the question," Carol rebuked him. "You can't just point a gun and circumvent the rule of law."

Tombstone raised his gun to point up at Carol. "Seems to me that's exactly what I'm doing."

"You're not going to shoot me," Carol scoffed. "Assassination of a public official on live television? You'd never get away with it! You might as well be committing suicide."

"She's right, son," Asgore added, stepping forwards - though he stopped and raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture when Tombstone turned the gun on him. "You haven't thought this through. The police will be surrounding the building any minute now. Trust me, I've been on the other side of hostage situations before. You may think you hold all the cards, but you've already lost. Might as well come quietly."

Kris tensed, their spider-sense flaring up from an underlying hum to a more urgent spike. They had to act now, before this got out of hand. Before their dad got hurt. Just like Noelle's father...

Their hand moved to the mask in their pocket, no longer caring who saw them put it on.

It was then that something came crashing through the window behind the stage.

Noelle was flying.

Or, well, she was falling, but it felt like the closest she had ever come to experiencing flight. If it hadn't been for the pure panic flooding her brain, she might have actually enjoyed the sensation.

Condor had flown her high into the sky before dropping her, up where the air was thin and it had become even harder to breathe - between that and the roar of the wind and the breath having been knocked out of her to begin with, it was hard to explain the case of mistaken identity. He had simply scooped her up and flown her high while ranting to himself about revenge and how this time he was going to make sure she hit the ground.

Finally, when he'd reached the apex of his ascent and switched his jetpack to hover mode so he could linger in the air, she worked up the breath to shout, "Wait!"

To her surprise, he actually hesitated. Grabbing her by the neck with one hand, he turned her around in the air to face him.

"I'm not Spider-Human!" Noelle blurted out past the hand wrapped around her throat. "I'm just dressed as them! L-Look at my antlers, see?"

Condor blinked and she saw his gaze flick from the antlers poking out of her mask to her hooves kicking at thin air, then travel up and down her costume, taking in her noticeably girl-shaped body.

He scowled at her. "You're *not* Spider-Human, are you? You're an imposter! Some kind of - of monster in spider's clothing!"

"Th-that's right!" Noelle said. "I'm not them, I don't work with them. I'm just a silly girl in a costume playing pretend." With a gulp she added, "So, uh, you have no reason to kill me. Right?"

"Not so fast," Condor growled. "I saw you on the rooftop webbing up the thief. You may not be the superhero I thought you were, but you were still interfering. The boss was very clear about what I should do to people who interfere."

"But I wasn't -" Noelle started to say, before realizing she had no idea how to finish the sentence. It was true, she *had* come there for the express purpose of thwarting Kingpin's plans, but she couldn't exactly explain to the villain that she'd done it because she was Dess's sister.

"You've wasted enough of my time," Condor said. "I need to get back down there in case the real Spider-Human shows up."

He looked down at the campus far below them; Noelle followed his gaze before she could think better of it, and her stomach lurched in terror. Her legs kicked helplessly, her eyes wide behind her mask.

“Please,” she whispered, clutching at his arm. Spider-Human wouldn’t have begged for their life like this, she knew that. They would have fought back, fearless in the face of deadly danger. But Noelle wasn’t feeling very heroic at that moment. She was mostly feeling terrified.

“Sorry, girlie,” Condor sneered. “Whoever you are, you have only yourself to blame. You shouldn’t have stuck your nose where it didn’t belong.”

And then he dropped her.

Noelle reached out wildly and clung to his arm with her sticky fingers, and for a moment, they both began to slowly drop down together. But then he kicked her in the stomach and she released him in shock and fell away.

She thrust her arms up and fired off weblines at Condor’s retreating figure. One of them missed, but the other snagged his leg, leaving Noelle hanging on for dear life to a thin silver thread.

For a moment, she thought she had saved herself. Then Condor bent down and sliced through the webline with a swoop of his razor-edged wing.

Note to self, Noelle’s brain thought ludicrously. *Adjust web fluid formula for durability, make it harder to cut.* She filed this away on her mental to-do list somewhere below ‘Don’t die,’ and then her brain busied itself with the more immediate task of screaming.

Above her, Condor circled the air, watching her flail as she fell.

The one benefit of the great height that she was falling from was that she had a few moments to contemplate impending death and wrestle her panic back under control. There wasn’t much time to think about it, but there *was* enough time to ask herself a single question: *What would Spider-Human do?* If she was going to face death for behaving like a superhero, then maybe she could survive like one too.

They’d been in situations like this before, hadn’t they? She had followed their adventures closely, so she knew they had fought airborne foes like the Condor and survived falls like this one. *Think, Noelle! How did they do it?*

The answer came to her in a flash. She wasn’t sure if she could pull it off, and she would only get one chance to try, but the campus was rushing up to meet her fast, and it was now or never.

She quickly flicked the knobs on her web-shooters, raised her hands above her head, and began to spray webbing and pray.

It wasn’t the single strands for webslinging this time, but the thick nets, like fully woven spiderwebs. They were just as sticky as every other kind of webbing, though, and that was what she was counting on.

Because as soon as those dual web nets connected, they stuck to each other, and formed a makeshift parachute. As parachutes went, it wasn’t very well-tailored to the task: It was riddled with small holes that let the air through, and she had to

hold onto the ends for dear life, the sticky material and her super-powered arm muscles the only things keeping the wind from ripping the whole construct out of her grasp.

But it *did* catch the wind. Not enough to fully slow her momentum, and not enough to save her from a painful, possibly fatal landing. But maybe, with a little luck and a little strategic shifting of her weight, enough to steer.

The campus rooftops were not far below her now; she was almost back where she started, but still coming in much too fast.

That was when she saw where the wind was taking her. Noelle nearly burst out laughing from relief and irony when she looked through the big, bright window she was barreling towards and saw her mother and Asgore Dreemurr on the debate stage.

And then the window came rushing up to meet her and her parachute, and she pulled her legs up and kicked out at the last second, punching through the glass.

For a moment, everything was chaos, a cacophony of shattering glass and shocked screams. Noelle let go of her unwieldy parachute and dropped the rest of the way to the floor, rolling as she landed. It was a rough landing, but Noelle was tougher than she had been just a day ago, and as she lay there sprawled on the floor and groaning, her thoughts were less about her bruised and aching body than the simple joy of still being alive.

The only thing that pulled her back into the present moment was the insistent tingle of her spider-sense going off, alerting her to danger. She pushed herself up off the floor and stood up, feeling dizzy and disoriented.

She was greeted by the sight of men in black suits and ski masks, both next to her on the stage and above her up in the seats, all pointing guns at her. A whole crowd of onlookers was staring at her, and the gunmen holding them hostage looked skittish and trigger-happy, like she was a wild animal that might lunge for their throats at any moment. But they also looked bewildered, unsure what to do with her - clearly, she hadn't been part of whatever orders they'd been given.

"Uh, h-heh guys," she laughed weakly. "Mind if I drop in?"

The feeble attempt at levity was met with the cocking of pistols. The man nearest to her took a step closer, shoving the barrel of his gun in her face.

Noelle was about to act - leap out of the way or start firing off webs or even just throw herself swinging at the gunmen, her brain hadn't settled on an option yet - when she heard a deep, familiar voice shout, "Wait!"

She looked over to see Asgore standing next to her mom and staring at her. There was no recognition in Carol's eyes, only shock, but Asgore was wearing an odd expression: confusion, like she would have expected, but also a keen curiosity. "That's not Spider-Human," he said, and Noelle couldn't quite tell if he was talking to the men threatening her or to himself.

“Not unless we’re all seeing double! And I haven’t even hit these guys in the head yet!” a voice called out from above, and everyone, Noelle included, looked up to see a bold, blue-costumed figure hanging upside down from the ceiling.

And then the guns started firing. The crowd of onlookers screamed and ducked their heads, but the gunmen weren’t aiming at them. They were unloading all their ammunition at the ceiling, and the spot where Spider-Human had just been. But they were all of them missing the mark, because already the superhero was swinging through the air, shooting webbing into faces, kicking goons in the head and plucking their guns from their arms.

Quickly, Noelle’s brain caught up with the situation: Her hero was here to rescue her yet again. These men were trying to kill them, and bullets were flying everywhere, threatening to hurt not only her and Spider-Human but also her mom and Kris’s dad and everyone else in the crowd. And Noelle couldn’t let that happen.

She’d had enough for one day of clinging desperately to life, trying just to keep her head above water. So she had wanted to play the hero? Well then it was time to do what heroes did: Protect everyone else regardless of the risks.

With an enraged battle cry, Noelle threw herself at the nearest gunman, who was so preoccupied shooting at Spider-Human that he didn’t see her coming in time to train his gun on her instead. She shoved him to the floor and ripped the rifle from his hands as he fell. “You *really* shouldn’t play with guns!” In a fit of strength that surprised even her, she threw the rifle away so hard that it went spinning through the air like a boomerang and straight out through the broken window high above them. “Someone might get hurt!” The man tried to stand up, and she kicked him in the jaw. He slumped to the floor, unconscious. “That’s for trying to take Mayor Holiday hostage, you big bully!”

Nearby, her mother and Asgore were still staring at her. Carol stepped forward. “Young lady, while I appreciate the help...”

“Hold that thought!” Noelle said, because the second goon on the stage with them had seen what she’d just done to his buddy and was charging at her. This one had already been disarmed by Spider-Human, but he’d produced a vicious-looking knife instead.

Her spider-sense made it easy to see the attack coming. He slashed at her horizontally - Noelle planted her hooves and stood her ground, but bent her legs and leaned her body backwards, letting the knife pass harmlessly through the air where her face had just been. Then she bounced back up before the crook could regain his balance and nailed him in the jaw with a fierce right cross, just like Dess had once taught her to do if she ever needed to defend herself.

There wasn’t much grace or fluidity to the move; none of the agile jumping around that Spider-Human did. But speed and super-strength got the job done, and her opponent crumpled unconscious to the ground.

Asgore looked impressed. “A new monster superhero? Well I’ll be damned. Just who exactly are you supposed to be, anyways?”

“Uh, hi, Mr. Dreemurr, sir!” Noelle chirped, suddenly anxious. If Dess had seen through her disguise so quickly, surely her mom and her best friend’s father would figure it out equally fast, wouldn’t they? “Just call me, um, Spider-Doe!”

“Great,” Carol said flatly. “Now there are two of them.” She pinched the bridge of her nose right above her glasses like she always did when she was trying to ward off a headache and muttered, “I *knew* that human was going to be a bad influence on monsterkind’s youth. And a deer, too. Noelle is going to be insufferable when she hears about this.”

Noelle was about to say something indignant and probably unwise when she was saved by a sudden spike of her spider-sense. She leapt forward and tugged on Carol and Asgore’s arms. “Get down!”

They all ducked, just as Spider-Human came flying through the air right above them and crashed into the wall.

While the superhero picked himself up with a groan, Noelle balled her fists defensively and turned to look in the direction they’d come flying from. Most of the audience had fled the room as soon as the fighting started and no one was paying attention to them anymore, and most of the criminals had been dispatched, but a short skeleton monster still stood there between the otherwise empty rows of seats. Noelle recognized him as one of the mobsters, though he’d shed the ski mask, exposing a white face with a tight rictus of a grin and a single eye that glowed blue.

He lowered his hand, regarding them with a sneer. “Does the little girl-spider want a taste of the ol’ telekinesis too? ‘Cause I can squash spiders all day.”

Spider-Human staggered up behind them and put a hand on Noelle’s back. “Hey, new girl, when this is all over we’re going to need to have a conversation about copyright infringement, but since you’re here, think you can do me a favor and get the mayor and Mr. Dreemurr to safety while I kick this guy’s ass?”

Noelle looked down at them - she still wasn’t used to that - and said, “You mean while you get thrown around like a ragdoll? No way, Spider-Human. I’m not leaving you to fend for yourself.”

“I’m guessing you’re new to all this, right? This isn’t a training-wheels fight, this is the real deal. It’s too dangerous for a newbie.”

“And *I’m* guessing this creep can’t use his powers on both of us at the same time, so you need backup! Besides, I just survived getting dropped like a thousand feet by the Condor, I think I can handle -” Noelle abruptly cut herself off. “Wait, what happened to -”

Her spider-sense flared. She turned to her mom and Asgore. “Run! Get out of here!”

A second later, Condor dive bombed through the broken window. Noelle reacted on instinct at just about the same split-second as Spider-Human did, and both of them leapt into a backwards flip that carried them right over Condor’s head.

Noelle landed rather less gracefully than her human counterpart did, though, falling on her rear and scrambling to stand up again.

Condor wheeled about in midair, extending his formidable wingspan while he hovered off the ground. “Well well, looks like it’s my lucky day. I get to kill the real Spider-Human after all!”

“Fly on outta here, you fool!” the skeleton shouted. “I don’t need you butting in! I got this covered!”

“Like hell you do, Tombstone!” Condor squawked back. “You don’t get to hire me to do a job and then tell me not to do it! I’m finishing this, and if you’ve got a problem with that, you can take it up with your precious Kingpin!”

Asgore shook his head in disgust. “Unbelievable. This is exactly what I was talking about before we were so rudely interrupted, Carol. These maniacs are out of control.”

Spider-Human whirled around to stare at him. “What are you still doing here?! Go, while we hold them off!”

“Hey there, fake spider,” Condor leered at Noelle while Asgore and Carol finally got the hint and retreated. “I’m kinda glad you’re still alive, girlie. A bug as persistent as you deserves to get crushed by my own hands.”

Noelle thrust an accusing finger at him. “You creep! It’s about time someone clipped your wings for good!”

“Ooookay,” Spider-Human sighed. “We’re gonna have to work on your banter skills. But if you want to help then I guess I can’t stop you. Just try not to die, okay?”

Noelle saluted them, and immediately felt silly. “Doing my best!”

“You said you already fought Condor earlier, right? That would explain the dramatic entrance.”

Noelle nodded. “I learned the parachute thing from you by the way.”

“Alright then, how ‘bout this? I’ll go low, and you go high.”

Condor suddenly dived for her, but Noelle was ready for him. She leapt impossibly high into the air in a backwards flip and kicked Condor in the chest, forcing him to pull up out of his dive just before he could strike her. Before she could fall back onto the floor, Noelle attached a webline to Condor’s leg and was pulled up into the air after him.

As Condor flew around the room, trying to throw her off, she caught a glimpse of Spider-Human jumping around, dodging flying debris and throwing web balls as Tombstone ripped chairs out of the floor with his mental powers and sent them hurtling through the air. It was a fantastic battle to behold, unlike anything Noelle had ever seen with her own eyes, but she gave her head a quick shake and

focused on trying to subdue Condor's erratic flight. If she could just smash that jetpack or web up his wings...

"Get! Off of me!" Condor squawked. He flew headfirst at the wall, and Noelle, holding on tightly to her weblines, gasped when she realized what he was trying to do. At the last second he turned on a dime and soared away, parallel to the wall, leaving Noelle careening straight for it like a yo-yo on a string.

Instead of trying to prevent the collision, she twisted her body in midair, braced herself, and pumped her legs like she was running track back at school. Her hooves connected with the wall, immediately kicked off of it, and then she was running, sprinting along the wall while being pulled along by the sticky weblines in her hand.

Noelle ran faster across the long wall of the room's perimeter, breathing heavily as she fought to keep up, but invigorated by the rush of defying gravity like this. As they neared the far corner and she saw Condor angling to adjust his flight path again, she put on a defiant burst of speed and leapt into the air.

She intercepted Condor, straddling his back and wrapping an arm around his scrawny neck in a chokehold as together they spun and whirled through the air. The thruster of his jetpack burned uncomfortably close to her stomach, and she could feel the intense heat scorching her costume. Noelle bit back a scream and held on, trying to steer him back down to the ground.

Condor spun and rolled, attempting to shake her off, and as he did so, Noelle caught another glimpse of Spider-Human's battle below. Tombstone was still ripping up the seating and throwing things at them, but as Noelle watched, Spider-Human finally hit him in the face with a blast of webbing. The short skeleton teetered backwards, and the chair he'd been levitating was flung carelessly up into the air...

And directly into Condor's flight path.

Noelle saw it coming with just a second to spare. She let go of Condor, letting herself drop back to the ground. Condor kept flying, heedless of the danger. Then the chair collided with him with a heavy crunch, and the avian villain went into a tailspin and slammed into the floor, stunned, his jetpack sputtering out.

Noelle landed on the floor in a three-point crouch, one arm extended, just in time to see Spider-Human lunge forward and deliver a mighty punch to the blinded Tombstone. The skeleton reeled back, his skull cracked from the force of the blow, and for a moment, Noelle assumed that that would be that. Everything was finally under control now.

But then Tombstone mentally ripped the webbing from his face, caught Spider-Human in the grip of their telekinesis, and sent the superhero flying straight up into the air. A second later, Spider-Human came hurtling down towards the ground again, falling unnaturally fast.

"No!" Noelle shouted. A sudden memory of how Spider-Human had saved her from the falling debris at Gastcorp flashed across her mind, and she shot out a

pair of thick weblines up and to the opposite wall, directly under where the hero was falling. Wrists tight together, she held onto the ends as Spider-Human's body hit the webbing, making the ropes strain under their weight. The web bent low to the ground, but it didn't break.

Then it bounced back, sending Spider-Human flipping through the air again. But it broke the fall, and gave them the chance to recover and right themselves.

Noelle sprinted towards Tombstone, but a little too late. He caught her in the stare of his glowing blue eye, and suddenly she found that she couldn't move. She floated, hovering a few inches off the ground, frozen and wide-eyed under her mask.

"Well well, if it isn't the new spider in town," Tombstone sneered. "I bet the boss would like to know who had the gumption to come barging in here messing up his plans. Not that it'll matter after tonight, but, well...you've earned a bit of respect, so I'd like to look ya in the eye before I kill you."

Noelle squirmed in his telekinetic grasp. She felt a tug at her mask as it started to slip upwards off her face, exposing a few loose strands of golden hair.

"Hey bonehead! Skulls up!"

In a blur of blue, Spider-Human came swinging from behind Noelle, whipping towards Tombstone with their legs extended and driving their feet into the mobster's head. Tombstone went careening head over heels and landed in a pile of ripped-up seating. As he did so, his hold on Noelle was broken and she dropped back to the floor, pulling her mask back down over her head.

She hurried over to find Spider-Human spinning a veritable cocoon of webbing around Tombstone, leaving only a small space for him to breathe through. "Hey, nice job distracting him! I realized something while this guy was throwing chairs at me - he has to be able to see something to use his powers on it. So long as this web blindfold holds, he should be harmless."

"Are you okay?" Noelle asked. "You almost went splat there a couple times."

Spider-Human rolled their shoulder, which made a wince-worthy crunching sound. "Oh, I'll definitely be feeling this one in the morning. But don't worry, I've had worse. It *would have* been a lot worse, if not for you and that quick save. We make a pretty good team, Spider-Doe." They clapped a hand on her shoulder and then cocked their head as they twirled a finger through one of the loose curls of golden hair hanging out of her mask. "Should probably get your own costume though. Maybe something in red and green?"

Noelle blushed under her mask and stepped back. How did they know those were her favorite colors? "Well, uh, I'm glad I could help! I can't stay though, I left something...on the roof...?"

She winced a little to herself. *Dess is gonna be so pissed off. I hope she saw me not die when I was falling up there.*

Before she could go, however, the doors at the top of the hall slammed open and a tall fish monster in a policewoman's uniform stormed into the room, accompanied by a team of officers in full riot gear. "Freeze, NHPD!" Chief Undyne shouted, pointing her gun at the two Spiders. "Put your hands where I can see them! And no webs this time!"

"Come on," Spider-Human said to Noelle, "this is usually the part where I beat a hasty retreat. Good thing you made an escape route for us, huh?" They wrapped an arm around Noelle's waist before she could object, shot a webline at the ceiling, and swung them both out the big broken window, calling back over their shoulder, "Sorry, gotta run! If you want an interview you'll have to make an appointment with my agent!"

Noelle held on tight as Spider-Human swung her to safety. Despite all the high-flying, fast-falling action she'd been engaging in that night, at no other point had her stomach felt half so topsy-turvy as with her clinging to the wiry musculature of their body, one arm securely but gently wrapped around her. It was a brief moment, but enough to make all the aches and pains and adrenaline ease out of her as she finally relaxed. It was over now. She was safe with them.

But then they swung up and landed on the roof, where Noelle saw her sister bent over and cursing while she tugged futilely at the webbing sticking her hooves to the ground, and she remembered that she still had some damage to clean up. Hopefully Dess would forgive her.

"Wow," Spider-Human quipped as they set her down, "when you said you left something on the roof, I thought you meant like, a backpack with your clothes in it or something."

"Just...wait here a moment, please?"

Dess had her back to them, and she was entirely preoccupied with trying to get free, so she didn't notice Noelle's approach until the younger deer was right beside her. She startled, almost hitting Noelle in a panic, letting out a muffled yell through her web gag. Noelle reached up and pulled the sticky substance from Dess's face as gently as she could.

"Noelle! Please tell me you're here to finally get me out of this sticky shit."

"Sure, just one sec!" Noelle said. She thumbed through the settings on her web-shooters until she found the cartridge of fluid that she'd designed to dissolve her own adhesive - a handy failsafe, in case any of it got where it wasn't supposed to.

"I watched you parachute through the &\$!*ing window," Dess said while Noelle melted the webbing off her hooves, "and then there were gunshots, and...are you okay??"

"I'm fine," Noelle reassured her. "Everything's going to be fine now. I'll tell you all about it when we get home."

"What?" Dess frowned. "Noelle, you don't get it. We can't go home, not after this. Kingpin will be angry with me, he knows where I live, he'll be coming after

us! He'll send his men, and -" She squeezed her eyes shut and drew in a deep breath. "It'll be Dad all over again."

Noelle bit her lip, inhaling sharply. Dess was right: She hadn't even stopped to consider the ramifications of getting involved in this mess. "You don't think they would hurt Mom, do you?"

"Probably not," Dess admitted. "I mean, she's the Mayor... That'd be a pretty brazen move, and if they wanted her dead, they could have done it tonight. But you? You'll be his first target if he thinks I've betrayed him."

"I can take care of myself, Dess."

"Not if Kingpin gets his hands on you! You don't know how dangerous he is."

Someone cleared their throat behind them, and the sisters turned around to see Spider-Human standing there awkwardly. "Sounds like you could, um, use a hand with all that."

Dess stared at them, looking uncharacteristically speechless. "Noelle," she whispered, "since when the hell are you friends with Spider-Human?"

"Hey!" Noelle whispered back in a squeak. "Codenames! Spider-Doe!"

"It's okay," Spider-Human said, "you don't have to be all cloak and dagger about it. I know it's Noelle Holiday under that mask." They angled their head at Dess. "And December's pretty hard to forget."

Dess took a protective step forward. "Do I \$%*!ing know you?"

Noelle felt like she'd just had a sack of bricks dropped on her head. "What?! WHAT?! How do you know who I am?? Er, I MEAN...what makes you think I'm this Noelle person?"

"Come on," the superhero scoffed, "it's kinda obvious. I saw you get bit by that spider at Gastcorp. And how many other blonde reindeer girls are crazy enough to dress like me and go looking for a fight?" They shook their head fondly. "I mean don't get me wrong, it was brave. But also crazy. Oh, and I can see your nose glowing through your mask by the way."

"Fine, fine, you got me." Noelle pulled the mask from her face, exposing her red-nosed shame to the world. "Ugh. I've been a superhero for one day and I'm already the worst at secret identities."

Dess narrowed her eyes at them. "Okay, so you know who we are. Just who the hell does that make you?"

Noelle put a hand to her mouth and glanced sheepishly away. "I...would also like to know that. If - if that's okay!"

Spider-Human sighed. "I didn't think I'd end up revealing my identity to *even more* people tonight, but hey, what the hell? It's you, and after all this, I guess

you kinda need to know. But this time, Noelle, I'm really, really, *really* going to need you to not tell anyone."

Noelle's lungs temporarily stopped functioning as they reached up to pull the mask from their head. She swore she was this close to passing out from excitement. She had spent so much time imagining what kind of person Spider-Human might be under that mask. What if they were hideous? Worse, what if they were *hot*??

But nothing could have prepared her for the sight of familiar red eyes peering up at her from under long tangles of brown hair. For a second, all she could do was stare slack-jawed at her best friend while her brain overheated. Then she blurted out, "KRIS?????"

"Ta-daaaa," Kris said, spreading their arms theatrically. "Now you know my terrible secret. I may pretend to be a boring, average teenager, but in truth, I am actually awesome."

"But - but I - what??" Noelle sputtered. This was all wrong. Spider-Human, her beloved hero, her role model, couldn't be someone she *passed notes to in class*. She knew their parents, for Angel's sake! She'd been their friend for years! How had she not known about this?!

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner," Kris said, fidgeting uncomfortably. "I guess I always knew I would eventually. I tried to keep it just my secret at first, but the longer I kept it up the harder it got to keep people from -"

They were cut off by the sound of Dess laughing hysterically. Noelle stopped staring at Kris to stare at her sister instead. "*What* is so funny??"

"Hahahaha, shit, oh my goddddd," Dess wheezed. She was practically doubled over with laughter. "You've gotta be \$%!*ing kidding me!"

"Okay, not the reaction I was expecting," Kris said. "Is there a joke I'm missing here, Dess?"

"Shit," Dess said, wiping a tear from her eyes as she caught her breath. "Is there ever. I've got some shit I gotta tell you, Spider-Kris, but we can't stay on this roof all night and we can't go home just yet. Please tell me you know somewhere safe where we can talk."

"We've gotta go home eventually, Dess," Noelle said. "Mom will be expecting us to be there."

"I know, I know...but her and Spid-" Dess cut herself off and shot a look at Kris with her eyebrows raised. "And *Kris's* dad will be caught up talking to the cops for a while. They'll have to answer questions and give statements, and you can bet the media will be swarming all over this. It's gonna take them some time to get away. Maybe they'll even try to finish the debate. Hell, I bet Mom doesn't even think to call you for at least another couple hours."

"I actually do know a place nearby that we could go," Kris suggested. They paused and added, "You two trust Asriel, right?"

“Oh my Angel,” Noelle exclaimed in exasperation. “Azzy knows about you?”

“We shared a bedroom for my first two years of Spider-Humaning,” Kris shrugged. “It was kind of impossible to hide it from him.”

“Which means you trust him to keep a secret?” Dess questioned.

“Oh, with my life. You know Azzy, he’s reliable like that.”

“Yeah,” Dess huffed, “s’ppose he is. And I guess it’s only right that he knows too. Keeping it all in the damn families.” She turned and kicked at the roof angrily. “Dreemurrs and Holidays, I’m telling you. One big #!\$%ing web!”

“Well,” Kris said, putting their hands on their hips and looking at Noelle. “Azzy’s gonna love this. Not-it on carrying Dess down from the roof by the way.”

“I think she’d bite you if you tried,” Noelle said seriously. She put her hands on the back of her head and let out an enormous breath that she’d been holding in. “As soon as we get there, both of you have a LOT of explaining to do.”

Chapter 9: Secret Origins of the Dark Deer

Noelle had never actually been to Asriel's apartment before. Despite the fact that he hadn't left the city, and despite the campus not being all that far away from where she lived, it felt like Kris's brother had set off for a different world entirely when he moved out to go to college.

Looking around at the place now, however, she realized that it wasn't another world at all - it was just a studio apartment in a big student housing complex. It was modest in size, but homey. Asriel's bed was right there in the corner, and aside from a small kitchen and adjoining bathroom there wasn't anything to the apartment that she couldn't see just by turning around in a circle. He had a bookcase decorated with nerdy action figures and populated with textbooks and comics; a desk with a small TV and an armchair set up facing it; a standing closet next to an overflowing laundry hamper. Video game posters were taped to the walls.

Presumably Kris had been here often, at least judging from the way they had swung right up to the window on the side of the building and knocked, as if this were the most normal thing in the world (Noelle had been a little too busy climbing up the wall with her sister clinging to her back to question it). Once inside, Kris had casually helped themselves to a Diet Pipisi from the fridge and perched themselves hanging upside-down from a piece of webbing on the ceiling for some reason. For her part, Noelle had settled uncomfortably on the side of the armchair, while Dess, never one for social graces, had flopped straight onto Asriel's bed like she owned the place.

That left Asriel hovering awkwardly in his pajamas, nursing a beer ("Because I don't think I can deal with this sober") and rubbing his eyes. He hadn't seemed that surprised to see Kris knocking at his 4th-floor window, but he *had* looked more than a little taken aback to see Noelle and Dess there beside them.

"You're just lucky I live alone," Asriel said, stifling a yawn. "Would have been pretty hard to explain to a roommate why I've got a superhero sleeping over. And can we rewind to the part where Noelle is like the girl version of you now?"

"Azzy," Noelle chided. "I am *not* just the girl version of Kris!"

"Literally dressed just like me," Kris deadpanned from the ceiling. They sipped their Pipisi, their hair cascading down from their head.

"It's a work in progress! I haven't made a costume yet! Also, how are you drinking soda upside-down like that?"

"Very carefully."

"Actually nevermind that! I have so many questions for you!" Noelle blurted out. "How did you get your powers? Where does your webbing come from?"

Kris flapped their wrist at her, grinning mischievously. "It's *organic*. It comes from *inside me*."

"What?!" Noelle exclaimed. "Ewww! That's gross, Kris! And...also kind of fascinating?" She reached up and grabbed their arm, poking at their wrist as though there was some hidden button she could press that would make their body reveal its secrets. "I wrote a paper on you for biology class, you know."

"Wait, really?" Kris looked slightly uncomfortable. "That's kind of, uh..."

"I didn't know it was about *you*!" Noelle said, blushing and letting go of their wrist. "I just thought Spider-Human was interesting."

"Oh. Well, you know, the webbing is a human thing, all humans can do it."

"That's not - Is that true? That doesn't sound true. Are you messing with me right now?"

Kris quietly cracked up, unable to keep a straight face. "Haha, I totally am. It's just the radioactive spider DNA. I didn't choose the spider life, the spider life chose me."

"So if Kris is Spider-Human, who are you supposed to be, then?" Asriel asked Noelle. "Like, your codename and stuff."

Noelle blushed even deeper, feeling suddenly silly, like she really was just playing dress-up, but she shook it off. It was a stupid feeling, considering how much bad guy butt she'd already kicked. And if Kris could be a superhero then hell yes she could be one too. "I'm - I'm Spider-Doe!"

"Credit where credit is due, sis," Dess said snarkily from Azzy's bed, "You could have gone with Spider-Monster."

Kris swung slowly around on their webline to face her. "Oh yeah, and what's your cool supervillain codename, Dess?"

"Dark Deer."

Asriel let out a *snrrk* of laughter that was quickly muffled when Dess shot him a murderous glance. "That's, um..." He cleared his throat. "That's a really badass name, Dess."

Dess rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say, Mr. Ultimate God of Hyperdeath."

"That's not - ! I was 9 years old when I made that character!"

Dess smirked. "Okay, nerd. Gimme one of those beers and I promise I'll never tease you about it again."

"That's a lie," Asriel said, but he fetched a beer for her anyway. "I hope you're not planning on sleeping here tonight," he grumped as he passed the beverage to Dess. "You know that's the only bed I have, right?"

Dess took the beer can from him and popped the lid with her front teeth. “Aw, not willing to sleep on the floor for me, Azzy? And here I thought we were friends.”

“No flirting with my brother,” Kris said lazily as they spun in place.

Asriel sputtered indignantly. “How is that flirting??”

“It’s always flirting with you and Dess.” After a second they added, “Mostly Dess.”

“Not so much these days,” Asriel said. He looked at Dess. “I haven’t even seen you in months.”

“I’ve been busy,” Dess mumbled from behind her beer can.

“You’ve been ghosting me. Ever since...well, you know what. I wanted to be there for you, but you just shut me out.”

“It wasn’t just you, Asriel,” Noelle said softly.

Dess sat up, suddenly heated. “Wow, okay yeah, everyone pile on, why don’t you? I’ll admit it, I’ve been a shitty friend and an even worse sister. But if you knew what a complete shitstorm my life has been this year, maybe you’d cut me a little more slack!”

“Maybe it’s time you told us about it, then,” Noelle suggested.

“You can start with how your face got all messed up,” Asriel added.

“Great,” Dess said. “You know what, sure, let’s have storytime. This actually affects you, too, Azzy, so I’m glad you asked. Kris, can you get your superpowered butt down from the ceiling please? You’re weirding me out.”

Kris gave an upside-down shrug before twisting their body around to drop down to the floor, where they settled cross legged.

“Alrighty, guys and gals and pals,” Dess said, propping herself up against the wall and knocking back her beer with a belch. “It’s time for the astonishing origin story of the devious Dark Deer. Fair warning: This issue has not been rated by the Comics Code Authority.”

“And you call *me* a nerd,” Asriel teased.

“You think I’ve managed to have Noelle for a sister without ever cracking a comic book to see what all the fuss was about? Now shut up and let me tell the story.”

“So, I’m sure I don’t need to remind anyone that my dad was shot by a burglar. You all know this. What you may not know - except you of course, Noelle - is just how #%!&ing bad that feels. It’s not just the usual grief things that you see in the movies, the crying and the not wanting to get out of bed all day. There’s also *anger*. I’m talking the kinda anger that doesn’t stop until it burns you out from the inside, like a freaking collapsing star or some other metaphorical bullshit. It ain’t pretty, is the point. Because when someone you love is murdered, it’s not like they got sick or had an accident or even just went missing. You spend every waking moment with the knowledge that someone out there is to blame.

“So yeah, the first couple months I just...did the grief thing. I listened to a lot of angsty music, punched a few holes in my bedroom wall, got arrested a few times, abused like, every goddamn substance I could get my hands on - hey, speaking of, can you toss me another beer, Azzy? Noelle, don’t start, I swear I’ll cut myself off after two. Maybe three.

“...fine, two. Thanks Az, you’re a sweetie pie.

“Where was I? Oh yeah. So, somewhere along the line, while I was out stalking the city streets looking for trashy dive bars to fake-ID my way into and get wasted in, you know, while I was just on a roll with the good life choices, I got it into my head that maybe, with some amateur detective work and some patented Dess Holiday charm, I could get a lead on who the coward who killed my dad is. I mean, these were some pretty shady places I was poking my dumb nose into, and it had been all over the news. Somebody had to know something.

“Course, life isn’t some movie where you just happen to overhear the killer bragging about it to his buddies over beers. It’s a big city, and that murdering creep probably doesn’t even *have* friends. But it was something to do, you know? I really needed to feel like I was doing something, even if it was stupid and dangerous and futile.

“I started going to worse and worse neighborhoods, the kind of places where the only thing stopping you from instantly getting mugged on the street is the fact that it’s crime gang territory, and at least those mafia types are classy enough to maintain some kind of order. I was staying out all night plying the criminal element with booze and flattery in the hopes that someone’s lips would be loose enough after a few beers to point me in the right direction.

“Some of those places didn’t let me in of course. Members only, and why the hell would they want some random chick poking around? But plenty of the shittier ones were only too happy to have a hot girl around to chat people up, regardless of her reasons for being there. Especially if she was buying rounds for everyone. That alone should have raised some eyebrows, because I wasn’t exactly going to these places dressed like a rich girl, you know what I mean?

“And before you get all worried, Noelle, I never let any of them lay a finger on me. Not like that, anyways. You know me, I’m fierce. I think that’s what those guys liked about me, y’know? I would actually stand up for myself when they were being creeps. I carried a knife on me and I made sure everyone knew it. I drank to keep up appearances instead of to get wasted, and I never let my drink out of my sight. And I kept coming back, playing hard to get, ‘cause I knew they

wouldn't give me what I wanted if I let them have what *they* wanted that easily. So I toed the line. Drank some of 'em under the table, too. And because I had money, I started gambling. Card games, mostly. Poker in the back room with all these gruff mobster types smoking cigarettes, I mean can you picture it? Actually those guys I liked more than the random drunks, 'cause they just wanted to fleece some money from a naive kid with a bad poker face.

"Anyways, the more I got away with all this, the bolder I got. Because none of these lowlifes knew shit, but I was kinda enjoying it anyways, you know what I mean? 'Course you don't, you all are good kids, not dirtballs like me. So you'll have to take my word for it when I say that doing this stuff was a thrill. And I knew it was selfish, like, Mom and Ellie had just lost someone and now here I was literally flirting with danger. But it made me feel alive, and I could justify it by telling myself I was doing it all to avenge Dad.

"And because I was so angry, I had a lot of aggression to work out. Got into scraps a couple times when someone wouldn't take no for an answer. But I guess some of the guys who saw me fight were impressed, because eventually, I got slipped an invite to a more...underground kind of establishment. The kind where a scrappy doe with a chip on her shoulder could make a buck while getting some free therapy in the bargain. You all have heard of cage-fighting, right?

"Pick up your jaw off the floor and stop drooling, Azzy, you heard me right. Your gal Dess 'Fight Club' Holiday is even more of a badass than you realized. I got a mean right hook, you know! Don't piss me off or I'll show you sometime. WHAM, POW! Hahaha. Just kidding. Don't get comfy now, the real sucker punch is coming up soon.

"The thing was, I was starting to get a reputation. People were talking about the mysterious deer girl throwing money and fists around every night. Not a lot of other women my age getting into that ring, you know? I was drawing a crowd at the fights, even winning sometimes, but I was also getting the absolute shit kicked out of me on the daily. You wanna know why I spent so much time locked in my room sleeping all day, Noelle? That's why. Even my bruises had bruises.

"And whatever money I was making from fights went right back into supporting my growing gambling habit. All those nights spent in smoky gaming dens losing at poker so that people would keep wanting to play poker with me weren't getting me any closer to catching Dad's killer, but they *were* burning through all my money and then some. I started racking up debt, putting down bets that I couldn't pony up when I lost. And I was telling the guys, "Hey, don't worry, I just need to win a couple fights. I'm good for it."

"But some of the players didn't want to settle for taking IOUs. There was this one gambling den run by a gang of shark monsters. Toothy guys with mean little eyes; if I'd been smarter I would have stayed the hell away from them, but you know me. Anyways, some of 'em started strong-arming me, telling me to pay up or else. And then they dropped the little bombshell that they *knew my name*. Here I was, figuring that all these crooks were too dumb as rocks to put the pieces together, but it turns out they were just waiting until they had something to hold over me. They knew my family had money. They wanted what I owed them plus interest, and they weren't above threats.

“So I was starting to panic, trying to figure out how to dig myself out of this situation I’d gotten myself into. And that’s when he stepped in. The guy who secretly owned all these bars and gambling dens and knew exactly what I was getting up to every night. Hell, he probably had half the mobsters there on his payroll. Not the sharks, though. If I had known that little fact, I would have steered clear, but by then it was too late.

“You wanna know the funny thing? When his goons pulled a bag over my head on my way out of the bar and threw me in the back of a van, I wasn’t freaking out, I was excited. Because one of them had growled in my ear, “The Kingpin wants to talk to you,” and all my dumbass brain could think was, *Well, that guy sounds important. Maybe he knows something, and all of this will still turn out to have been worth it.*

“That’s how far gone I was. Or maybe I just didn’t care what happened to me anymore. Maybe all of it was just one long, fun slide into self-destruction. Whatever the case, I didn’t get what I wanted, but I still got a whole lot more than I bargained for when I came face to face with the Kingpin of Crime.

“They took me to a penthouse apartment in the middle of the city. I was blindfolded the whole time, and they must have taken me in through a service entrance and up a private elevator so no one would see me. I remember my heart thumping around in my chest and my stomach lurching as the elevator rode us up and up and up for what felt like forever. And then they escorted me through the building and out onto the roof and then into someplace hot and humid. Only then did they take the blindfold off and let go of me.

“I was in a huge glass greenhouse, surrounded by hanging plants and rows and rows of flowers in all colors, a whole rainbow of lush, growing things. It smelled like soil and fertilizer and the fragrant scent of flowers. And there was a man there, a monster in a white suit, the biggest monster I’ve ever seen. He was pruning a rose, and his horns grazed the lights hanging from the ceiling when he turned to look at me. And I knew him.

“...It was your dad, Asriel. Yours and Kris’s. It was Asgore mother–ing Dreemurr.”

“Wait, what?!” Kris practically bolted upright, sharing an incredulous glance with their brother. “You can’t be serious. You’re seriously saying the *Kingpin*, the crime boss whose goons I’ve been tangling with for months, the guy who seems to have his fingers in every organized crime pie in the city, is really...”

“Your dad,” Dess said. “Yes. Trust me, I probably looked just as shocked as you do right now.”

“That can’t be true,” Asriel said, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, Dess, but it *can’t* be. It’s absurd!”

“How much did your mom ever tell you about why she divorced your dad?”

“I - I don’t know,” Asriel stammered. “Just personal stuff. She didn’t love him anymore. Sometimes...sometimes marriages break down and it’s not anyone’s... I didn’t ask for details, okay?”

“Well, I have a slight suspicion about what might have caused the rift,” Dess deadpanned. “I’m sorry to break it to you, Azzy, but there’s a lot more to your dad than the friendly face he puts on for the public.”

Noelle felt like her brain was being twisted into a pretzel shape, contorting impossibly to try and wrap itself around this information. “Wait, but Dess, Kingpin was the one behind the attack on the debate tonight. Asgore was there, he was the target, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“I’m getting to that,” Dess said. “Let me finish the story, okay? There’s a lot more to tell.”

“Okay,” Kris said skeptically. “I don’t get it, but I’ll entertain it. What happened next?”

Asgore calmly regarded Dess, looking not at all surprised to see her, like he’d had a while to consider how this moment might go. Dess stared at Asgore with her jaw open, probably looking like her brain was doing somersaults inside her head. She had always had a shit poker face.

Dess wasn’t often rendered speechless, but this time it fell to Asgore to break the silence. The massive, horned monster turned back to the rose bush he was pruning with a pair of clippers and said, “Do you like the flowers? Many of them are one of a kind, you know. Not like the more commonplace varieties we sell at Flower King. These are unique breeds, genetically engineered to be that much more vivid in color, that much more fragrant than their natural counterparts. Some would call that cheating. I call it taking advantage of every available resource to produce the most favorable result. I call it *smart*.”

“F**k the flowers,” Dess blurted out. Of all the things she’d tried to mentally prepare herself for after being kidnapped by a mob boss, her best friend’s dad delivering a supervillain monologue wasn’t one of them. “Asgore, what the actual hell is going on here?”

“I thought we could have a little chat,” Asgore said, gesturing at her with the clippers. “I know what you’ve been getting up to in my establishments. I know that you’re in trouble.”

Dess narrowed her eyes at him and balled her fists. "Is that a threat?"

"December, please," Asgore rumbled. "If I wanted anything more than a civil conversation, I wouldn't have invited you into my home."

"Invited me?? Your goons here abducted me!"

"Ah yes, that reminds me." Asgore nodded at the two men who had hauled Dess in there. "You may wait outside while I talk to Ms. Holiday, thank you."

"You sure, boss?" one of the men, a beefy crocodile monster, said. "She seems kinda agitated."

"She's a 20-year-old girl, Demitri," Asgore said with a note of impatience, "and a friend of the family. I believe I will be fine."

"...We'll be right outside," Demitri said, and he and the other bodyguard retreated through the greenhouse door.

"That's better," Asgore said when they had gone. "Now we can speak privately."

Dess's eyes flicked to the clippers in his massive paw. "What, so you can stab me with those oversized scissors? Feed your plants with my blood or whatever your psycho villain thing is?"

"I think you've misjudged me," Asgore said testily. "If I wanted you harmed, December, I could have had it done weeks ago, without getting my own hands dirty. Why do you think you've been able to move through the criminal underworld unmolested? As soon as you started poking around, I put the word out that you were off-limits. I wanted to see what you would do if you got comfortable."

"Drink a lot of booze and waste a lot of money, same as the next schmuck," Dess said with a cocky little bow. "Did I sate your curiosity?"

The idea that she had been unwittingly playing with a handicap this whole time didn't sit well with her. She'd thought herself so clever, so unafraid to venture into dangerous places. What might have happened to her if she hadn't had Asgore's protection? Dess suppressed a shiver.

"The cage-fighting was unexpected," Asgore continued as though she hadn't interrupted. "A test of your commitment. Your willingness to take a punch shows a lot of strength. And I will admit, you held your own...even if I did place proxy bets on you and bribe your opponents to throw the match." He chuckled. "You made me a decent bit of extra spending money with that little scam, so thank you for that."

"What?!" Dess exclaimed, stepping forward with her fists clenched. She jabbed a thumb into her chest. "No. No, I won those fights fair and square! *I* did that!"

"Sure you did, December," Asgore said with an amused smile. "Everything you accomplished, you did all by yourself. And look how much you have to show for it. Thousands of dollars in debt to some dangerous people, and not one step

closer to your goal.” He resumed cutting leaves off of thorny rose stems. *Snip, snip, snip.* “I know you’re looking for Rudy’s killer. As foolish as it is...I can understand how you feel.”

Snip, snip, snip.

Dess steeled herself, swallowed, and asked the question that had been building inside her since she laid eyes on him. “Was it you?”

Asgore paused, holding himself still and silent. “Was what me?”

The bastard was really going to make her say it. “Did you kill my father?”

Asgore turned to face her again, frowning. “I *knew* your father. He was a close friend.” A shadow passed over his face; something in the eyes that Dess thought she recognized. “Closer than you know. No one wanted to see Rudy dead, least of all me.”

“That’s not the same as saying that you didn’t do it.”

“Very well then, if you insist: I did not kill your father. Nor could I tell you the name of the person who did. Do you think, with my connections, that I wouldn’t have tried to find that person, just as you’ve been trying to? But it appears to have been a burglary gone wrong, nothing more.” He sighed, a loud, heavy sound from lungs as large as his. “Sometimes bad things just happen in this world, December. No conspiracies behind it. Just life being unfair.”

“What do you know about life being unfair?” Dess challenged. “You seem to have it pretty good with your swanky penthouse and your expensive super-plants and your, what, secret criminal empire? That’s a thing you have now, I guess?”

“Everything I have is the result of hard work and years of careful planning,” Asgore retorted. “My old job as the city’s chief of police gave me an understanding of how crime rings operate, and the mistakes that can ultimately undo them. And after that, Flower King gave me a business that I could scale up into a city-wide money laundering operation while I solidified my hold on the underworld. I have been very careful about covering my tracks. But there have been...sacrifices along the way. My family, my friends. I’ve given up much to get to where I am today.”

Dess’s eyes went wide as the pieces clicked into place in her brain. “Wait, is that why Toriel dumped you? You didn’t let her in on the operation, and she found out you were criming on the side? Holy shit, dude. Does Asriel know? Does Kris?”

“You’re probably imagining right now that you can blackmail me,” Asgore said nonchalantly. “I am running for mayor against your own mother, after all, and now I’ve just handed you information that would destroy me if it got out. So before you get any stupid ideas, I want you to think very carefully about why I would do that.”

Dess gulped. “You wouldn’t trust me with all this if...if...”

“Oh, don’t mistake me,” Asgore said. He took a step closer, those sharp pruning shears still in his hand. “Being honest with you does not mean that I trust you. I would say ‘about as far as I could throw you,’ but...” He chuckled. “Well, we *are* 50 stories up.”

Dess took a hasty step back, almost tripping over a ceramic planter. She glanced over her shoulder at the greenhouse door, but even if she were to make a break for it, how far could she get with those bodyguards waiting outside?

She looked up at Asgore, trying to put on a brave face. “Y-you said you didn’t want to hurt me.”

Asgore’s expression was stony and stern. “One thing I’ve discovered in my line of work is that sometimes there’s a world of difference between what I want and what needs to be done.” But then his expression softened and he set down the pruning shears. “But you’re right - I don’t need to kill you, December. As a witness against me, you’d hardly be credible. You have no proof, and the word of a lone girl with a criminal record wouldn’t be worth much against a respected business leader and former police chief.”

“Yeah, you’re just a model citizen, aren’t you? Not like me, I’m the *real* menace to society here.”

Asgore smiled. “Not everyone thinks so little of you. Where others see nothing of value, I see potential in you.”

Dess let out the nervous breath she’d been holding, trying to slow her racing heartbeat. This conversation was giving her whiplash, but at least her life didn’t seem to be in danger. “What do you mean, potential?”

“You’re young, scrappy, doggedly determined, brave to the point of foolishness. I see a lot of your father in you.” Asgore absentmindedly brushed his fingers across the petals of a golden flower as he spoke. “All his best qualities, raw and unfiltered. But you clearly lack direction and purpose in life, don’t you? You’re at loose ends. What you need is something you’re good at, and someone to help you hone those talents. I can offer you many unique opportunities.”

Dess blinked. “What are you saying? That all of this is some kind of...job interview?”

Asgore laughed, a hearty guffaw. “Ha! Yes, I suppose you could think of it that way.”

“You haven’t got enough thugs with guns already?”

“Oh, December, you would be wasted as yet more hired muscle. I was thinking of something a little more glamorous. Tell me, have you ever stolen anything before?”

“Uh, sure, I guess.” Dess put her hands in the pockets of her skinny jeans and shrugged self-consciously. “Lotta shoplifting and stuff. You know, since we’re opening up about our criminal pasts here.”

“The acquisition and fencing of stolen goods is an important financial backbone of my operations,” Asgore explained, with all the casual ease of a professor giving a lesson on economics. “Jewels, priceless art, and...other things. And for that, what I need isn’t brute force. It’s people who can get in and out of places undetected. People with courage and intelligence and a certain, shall we say, roguish nature.”

“Ah, look man, I’m flattered I guess, but this is all...” The phrase that came to mind was ‘totally insane’ but Dess didn’t think that she should say that out loud. “I mean look, I’m a delinquent and a troublemaker, but I’m not some kind of master criminal. The crime life is not my scene.”

Asgore laughed, his barrel chest straining under his suit. “Is that so? Did you think those fight clubs and illicit gambling dens you frequented were legal? Did you think you could settle your debts by writing the sharks a check? A little one-time transaction, take out a loan, pay it back, no harm no foul? You’re already in this waist-deep. But I’m offering you a way to turn that to your advantage. I can take you under my protection, help you make those debts disappear, and you can help make us both a substantial profit while we’re at it.”

“What, and if I get caught, it doesn’t matter because I’m expendable?” Dess protested. “I appreciate the offer, but I already have money. I can take care of this myself.”

“Your *mother* has money,” Asgore corrected dismissively. “You have an allowance. And you’re not listening to me. The people you owe money to are going to collect one way or another, even if they have to take their payment out of your hide. And it would break my heart to see Rudy’s eldest daughter end up at the bottom of the river.”

Dess bared her teeth in a silent snarl. “Threats again? My mom’s a politician, you dickhead, you think you’re the first person to threaten my family?”

Asgore spread his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “I’m not the one threatening you. I’m just pointing out that you’re in a sticky situation with a lot to lose if you play your cards wrong. The Sharks are one of the few monster gangs in this city who don’t yet answer to me - though they will if they hurt you, I can promise you that. But no revenge of mine would do you any good if you’re already dead.”

“Look, Asgore, or Kingpin or whatever the hell you call yourself,” Dess fumed, “I don’t like you and I don’t trust you. Now, I’m not saying I’m going to rat you out, but just for the sake of argument here, why shouldn’t I just cut my losses and go to the cops with all this?”

At this, Asgore strode quickly forwards, forcing Dess to back up in a hurry, until her back *thumped* against the glass wall of the greenhouse. He loomed over her and said coldly, “Because you can’t damage me half as much as I can damage you and your family if I want to. I’ve had plenty of time to acquire evidence of your recent actions. The mayor’s daughter engaging in illegal activities, associating with the type of crowd you’ve been palling around with? That would be a real scandal if it were to leak to the press. Enough, I would wager, to tank your mother’s campaign. To say nothing of what it would do to your own future.”

Dess tilted her chin defiantly up at him. “What makes you so sure I care about those things?”

Asgore scoffed. “You care because your father would have cared. He wouldn’t have wanted you to throw away you and your family’s future for no reason.”

Dess glanced down at the ground, biting her lip angrily. How dare he use her dead father against her? And yet, it was true, and deep down, she knew it. She had done all of this to try and avenge her dad, hadn’t she? But all she had done was dishonor his memory by selfishly endangering herself and her family. And now she was facing a choice between digging herself deeper into this hole of criminal liability, or bringing everything crashing down around her ears in her attempt to climb out. She was stuck. At least digging deeper would keep her and her family safe for now.

Asgore knelt down and tilted her chin up with his hand, forcing her to look him in the eye. “If you agree to my terms, December, you *will* be rewarded for it. I’ve kept you safe thus far, and I’m the only one who can continue to keep the predators circling you at bay. I owe Rudy that much.” He suddenly gripped her firmly by the chin with his giant, white-furred hand, squeezing her cheeks together. “But if you were anyone else - if you weren’t his daughter, if you weren’t friends with my son - then I would not be nearly so generous. Do you understand?”

The force of his grip made it a struggle to talk, but Dess managed to mouth through smooshed lips, “Dude, you’re hurting my jaw!”

Asgore released her, and Dess worked her jaw, wincing as she did so. “Shit, man, I get the point. You win. I’ll do your thieving or whatever, just...on two conditions.”

“And what would those be?” Asgore said seriously.

Dess held up a finger. “One, I’m not going to hurt any innocent people on your say-so. You want somebody roughed up, get someone else to do it.”

Asgore nodded. “The sort of work I have in mind for you shouldn’t require violence.”

“Good.” She held up a second finger. “And two, that you never touch me like that again. I don’t care how big and strong and powerful you are, I am not going to let you manhandle me. Miss me with that toxic masculinity intimidation tactic BS, or I’ll give you a shiner that’ll be awfully hard to explain on the campaign trail.”

Asgore clenched his fist for a moment, but then smoothed out his beard with that hand instead. “Very well. I apologize for overstepping like that. I should have been more respectful of your boundaries.”

“Nice line, did you learn it in couple’s counseling?” Dess was gaining a newfound appreciation for Asriel’s mom with every passing minute. How had a nice lady like Toriel ever been married to this asshole? And how, during years of

hanging out at Asriel's house, had she never noticed what kind of monster his father was?

Asriel... Should she tell him? He deserved to know the truth about his dad, didn't he? But who knows how Asgore would respond if she did that. And anyways, she selfishly didn't want to be the one to ruin Asriel's image of his father. She didn't want him to forever associate her with that kind of bombshell.

Asgore ignored the dig. "It's getting late, December. Time you were getting back home to your family. I'll have my men give you a ride."

"I can find my own way home, thanks," Dess said flatly.

He stared her down for a moment before shrugging his broad shoulders. "Suit yourself. But here, take this." He produced a sleek black cell phone from his pocket and handed it to her. "Keep it on you. I'll be in touch. When the time comes, you'll be supplied with equipment, training, and instructions for your first assignment."

"Gee, thanks. Do I get dental benefits too?"

Asgore snorted. "Welcome to the team, December."

Dess took that to mean that she was dismissed, but on her way out, she hesitated. She turned back and said, "One more thing. The way you talk about my dad... Just who was he to you, anyways? More than just your average friend, it sounds like."

"That," Asgore said, "is a story you'll have to earn. Stick with me, prove that I can trust you, and maybe one day I'll tell you all the things that your father never did."

He turned his attention back to his plants, and Dess decided not to push her luck any further. She let Kingpin's men escort her in silence back through the penthouse and down the elevator, thankfully without a blindfold this time. Once safely back on the bustling city street, she pulled up the maps app on her phone to get her bearings, and headed for the nearest train that would get her closer to home.

She had a lot on her mind during the ride back, the cloying scent of flowers still clinging to her fur.

"You can probably guess the rest," Dess said. "He had this costume made for me, to disguise my identity in case anyone saw me running around the city. It was small stuff at first, like robbing jewelry stores. The only tricky part was disarming the security systems, but he gave me gadgets that helped with that, real high-tech stuff."

She had relayed the story of her first encounter with the Kingpin as accurately as she could; not word-for-word, but it had been a hard conversation to forget. All throughout her telling, she'd had a rapt audience, her sister and the Dreemurr siblings hanging on every word.

She hadn't overlooked the conflicting emotions on Kris and especially Asriel's faces, though: disbelief and disgust and betrayal. They were angry, and they were well within their rights to be - but at least that meant that they believed her.

"I remember investigating those robberies," Kris said. "As Spider-Human, I mean. I was on your trail, but you never left any clues behind." They shook their head in mild awe. "I gotta hand it to you, Dess, you're a good thief."

"Kris!" Noelle chided. "That's not exactly a compliment."

"I'll take it as one," Dess grinned. She was probably showing an inappropriate amount of pride, but damn it, Asgore had been right about one thing: It had felt good to be good at something. Maybe if the things he'd had her doing had felt worse, she wouldn't have let them go too far.

"It was a good run. I was having fun with it, even," she admitted. "But things changed after the Gastcorp job. Kingpin wanted me to take advantage of the reactor's unveiling to sneak in and steal company secrets. Some freaky spider that was being used as a test subject for something - he didn't really give me the whole low-down, just told me what to look for and how to get it. I didn't know what he wanted with it, but I was getting cocky and bored with the basic B&E routine, so I figured, hey, sounds like a fun challenge. Break into someplace with *real* security.

"So I planted a device on the reactor to sabotage it, like he told me to." She looked to Noelle, trying to convey her genuine regret. "It was just supposed to be a distraction. I had no idea it would make the whole thing explode! If I had known it would be so dangerous, if I had known you and Mom and Kris would be there, I would have told Kingpin to go f--"

"It's okay, Dess," Noelle interrupted. "No one was hurt." She looked at Kris and added, "Thanks to Kris, anyways."

Kris blushed a little. "All in a day's work..."

"Hey, for the record, I tried to save your life too!" Dess said. "I even lost the frickin' spider in the process, so the whole thing was for nothing."

Noelle gave a little gasp, covering her mouth with her hand. "That's how I got my powers!"

Dess stared at her. "Come again?"

"The spider!" Noelle was practically bouncing up and down with a sudden excitement. "The spider that bit me was only there because you brought it there! Dess, you gave me superpowers!"

“Huh,” Dess said. “How ‘bout that? Guess I’m glad I didn’t deliver it to Kingpin, or else maybe he’d have superpowers now instead?”

“Unbelievable,” Kris said. They stood up and started pacing, except instead of turning around when they reached the wall, they just walked onto it and began pacing up and down the length of the wall instead. “Ever since I arrived on the scene, everyone’s been obsessed with recreating my powers or trying to figure out what makes me tick, and out of all of them, the only one that actually succeeded was Noelle?”

“And I wasn’t even trying!” Noelle added.

Kris threw up their hands. “Exactly! I thought I got my powers from a total fluke! A one-in-a-million random chance! But maybe that spider that bit me on that field trip to Gastcorp was just a prototype for the one that bit Noelle. Maybe none of the others have worked, like it takes some kind of rare mix of genetic factors or something, I don’t know. I’m not a scientist.”

“Makes sense to me,” Dess said, “but I’m not a scientist either.” She had noticed that Asriel had been quiet this whole time, so she turned to him and said, “You’re smart, Azzy. What do you think?”

Asriel glanced up abruptly, as though shaken out of his troubled thoughts. “Oh, uh, yeah. Sure. I mean, I think it’s swell that Kris has a new super-friend now, but can we back up to the part where my dad is a supervillain?”

“Not a *super* villain,” Dess said unhelpfully. “He doesn’t have powers. Unless being an 8-foot tall mass of muscle with a bad temper is what counts as a power these days.”

“He’s a boss monster...” Asriel said. “He’s already stronger than other monsters. That kinda counts.”

“Guess it makes sense he’d be a *crime* boss monster too!” Dess said, making fingerguns at Azzy. She glanced around at the roomful of disapproving looks and added, “What, too soon?”

Asriel held his head in his hands, an extremely stressed look in his eyes. “This can’t be happening. I mean this is my dad we’re talking about! The guy who used to drive me to school and cheer me on at track races and - and who taught me how to grow flowers and watched Monster Star Trek with me. He was a cop for Angel’s sake! He’s not a bad guy!”

“I bet you never thought your little sibling would become a superhero, either,” Kris said. They hopped down from the wall and went over to Asriel, putting a reassuring hand on his arm. “Look, Azzy, I get it. I’m feeling the same way right now. But I know better than most that sometimes people keep secrets. And if Dad’s doing bad stuff, then we need to stop him - it’s that simple. I mean, we’re his family. If anyone can get through to him, it would be us, right?”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Dess said darkly. When everyone turned to look at her, she pointed to her black eye. “Asgore’s known me since I was a kid. I

used to think of him as an uncle. But the other night, after the Gastcorp disaster, I told him that he and I were done, and he punched me in the face. He said that..." She gulped, suppressing a shudder at the memory. "He said that if I hadn't been Rudy's kid, he would have done worse. So yeah, he's sentimental, but only up to a point. And I don't want to find out what's past that point."

"I can't believe he'd hurt you," Asriel said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, well, I didn't punch *myself* in the face, Azzy."

"Yeah, I know, I...I believe *you*. It's just...this doesn't make any sense! Why would he sabotage his own debate against your mom?"

"You're right, it doesn't make sense. But I think that's the point," Dess said. "He wanted to maintain his own cover, make it seem like he couldn't possibly be the Kingpin. And if Noelle and Kris hadn't crashed the party he probably would have set it up to make himself look like a hero, so he can push the anti-crime stuff in his campaign even harder."

"Except obviously he's not as opposed to crime as he claims," Kris said.

"Of course not. He just wants to control it. Easier to rig the game in his favor from a position of power. He could use the powers of the Mayor's office to crack down on his rivals by day, and expand his own operations by night to fill the vacuum as the Kingpin. And he would have influence over NHPD - if any police investigations caused too much trouble for him, he could shut them down, or replace Undyne with a cop on his payroll."

"Okay..." Asriel said skeptically. "Let's say I buy all that. What about you? Why would he get you involved tonight?"

"He must have decided it was time to throw me under the bus and manufacture a scandal for my mom in the process. Even if I tried to burn him, no one would believe a criminal pointing the finger at her mother's political rival to save her own skin. He'd just claim he was being slandered, that it was proof that Mom can't even control her own daughter, let alone govern the city." Dess swore and violently punched Asriel's mattress with her fist. "\$@#* me! That was probably his plan from the moment he gave me a job. How could I have been so stupid?"

"This is all absurd...but..." Asriel clenched and unclenched his fist. "I know what you sound like when you lie, Dess, and you haven't been lying tonight." He rubbed his eyes with his palms. "Shit," he mumbled. "What are we gonna do?"

Noelle stood up suddenly. "We do the only thing we *can* do. The right thing." She put a hand to her chest and proclaimed passionately, "It's like Kris said - we're family, or as good as. And what good is a family if they don't take care of each other? I have these powers now, just like Kris, except I only got them because my sister was there. And Dess was only there because Kris's dad sent her there. Don't you see? We're all tangled up together, and I have to believe that means something. That this is what I was meant to use these powers for."

"What are you saying, Noelle?" Kris asked.

“I’m saying that I want to help! Your fight is my fight, Kris. This is my responsibility as much as yours.” She crossed her arms, radiating resolve. “And together, we can take down your dad and stop him from doing any more damage to this family!”

Before Kris could reply, there was a staticy crackle from the mask tucked into the waistband of their costume, and a shrill voice could faintly be heard saying, “Kris, come in! I just heard what happened on the news! Do you read me? And are those Noelle’s fair tones I hear in the background? Is she with you?”

“Shit,” Kris muttered. “I forgot to put it on do not disturb mode.” They grabbed their mask and spoke into whatever hidden microphone was inside it. “Not now, Berdly!”

Dess stifled a cackle at the look on Kris’s face when they looked up to see Noelle advancing on them.

“Uh, hey Noelle...”

“WHAT. THE. HECK!” Noelle exclaimed. “BERDLY??” She grabbed Kris by the collar of their costume and shook them violently. “You told Berdly that you were a superhero and not me?!”

“Ack!” Kris stammered, their head knocking back and forth. “N-Noelle, remember 30 seconds ago when you were saying that we’re all one big family?”

“THAT DOESN’T INCLUDE BERDLY!”

“Oookay, Ellie,” Dess said, hopping off the bed and putting a hand on Noelle’s shoulder. “I know it’s fun to manhandle Kris, but let’s hash out the details of each other’s secret lives later. Right now, we should be getting back home before Mom gets back and notices we’re not there.”

Noelle exhaled and let go of Kris. “Right. Sorry, Kris. I forgot how strong I am now.”

“Well *I* won’t be forgetting it anytime soon,” Kris muttered. “Geez.”

“Yeah, you’d better not!” Noelle giggled a little, then turned to give Asriel a hug goodbye. “Don’t worry, we’ll figure out a plan. And in the meantime, anything you need, just call, okay?”

“Thanks, Noelle. I’m sure I’ll see you again soon.”

“Okay,” Noelle said to Dess, “come on, I’ll swing you home.”

“Like hell you will,” Dess scoffed. “I’ve got a grapple gun and I’ve had a ton of practice with it the last few weeks. I’ll swing my own damn self home, thank you very much.”

“Hey, Noelle,” Kris said as she opened the window and prepared to leave.

She looked over her shoulder at them. “Yes, Kris?”

“If you’re serious about wanting to help, then meet me on the roof after school tomorrow. We’re going to have to give you a crash course in superheroing.”

Noelle gave them a salute. “See you then, Spider-Human.”

“Good night, Spider-Dork, I mean Doe.”

Noelle laughed musically, right before jumping out the window.

“Man,” Dess said aloud. “That’s gonna take some getting used to, huh?” And then she grinned, waved goodbye to Kris and Azzy, and leapt out the window after her sister.

Chapter 10: From Failure, Opportunity

Dr. Gaster stood in his personal laboratory, watching the news on a wall-mounted television. He *had* been watching the debate, only for that event to take a much more interesting turn than anticipated. The cameras had caught almost all of the action, and now MNN was replaying that footage, while underneath a scrolling chyron read: “NEW SUPERHERO ON THE SCENE: SPIDER-HUMAN AND MYSTERIOUS COPYCAT SAVE MAYORAL CANDIDATES FROM ARMED MOBSTERS.”

“A superhero...” Gaster murmured to himself. “Could it be?”

He turned his attention back to the long rows of glass tubes lining the laboratory wall. Each one held a single spider, of varying species and sizes. There was an empty space in the center of the wall, quietly vexing him. Of all the specimens, that one had shown the most promise, but now it was dead, leaving experiments unfinished and the results inconclusive. Save for one unplanned test subject that was now out there in the wild.

"We have a problem," a voice from behind him said. He had been so lost in thought that he hadn't even heard them come in.

Gaster turned to look at the young human. His assistant, Chara, was standing at attention in that perfectly poised posture of theirs, a lab coat over their sweater, ready to attend to whatever he needed. Chara had always been very loyal, committed to his cause of advancing monster society despite not being one themselves. For that reason, Gaster kept very few secrets from them.

But there was cunning behind their eyes, too; 'loyal' did not mean that they couldn't think for themselves. For *that* reason, Gaster didn't tell them everything.

“I saw,” he said, gesturing at the television.

Chara shook their head. “A different problem. Or perhaps a related one. Take a look at this.”

They held out their phone, and Gaster strode over to them to take it in his bony hands and play the video they had queued up for him. It was a video on MonsterTok - shaky camera phone footage of none other than Noelle Holiday at what must have been her school. She was in a most unusual and embarrassing position, stuck dangling from the ceiling by what appeared to be her antlers. She kicked her legs in the air and protested as a crowd of young monsters below stared up at her with their phones out, laughing.

For a moment, Gaster couldn't make sense of what he was seeing, nor why Chara was showing it to him. But then...

“This was taken yesterday. Note the way her hands never leave the ceiling,” Chara said, but Gaster was one step ahead of them.

"She got stuck," he said. "Adhesive fingertips, like -"

"A spider?" Chara said with a raise of their eyebrows, like they were pleased that he was finally catching up.

"Tell me, Chara," Gaster said, turning back to the television, "does that look like anyone we know?" On the TV screen, the news footage showed a feminine, antlered figure in a blue costume swinging on a webline through the room, side by side with Spider-Human.

"You really did it," Chara said, and for once, their normally flat tone of voice sounded impressed. "You made another one."

"If that is indeed the case, then we need to get young Ms. Holiday here as soon as possible to verify it."

"She's been dodging your calls," Chara said. "The question is why she would be reluctant. Mere days ago, you said she was excited by the prospect of working for you - as anyone would be. And you would think that with these new powers, she would turn to you for help understanding them."

"Circumstances have changed," Gaster said. "Perhaps the incident with the reactor shook her faith in me. She would not be alone in that, if the news coverage is any indication."

"The media are vultures looking for scandals to pick the bones of," Chara said disdainfully. "But maybe you're right, and she's afraid to return."

"She almost died here," Gaster said, bending to examine one of the spiders in its cylinder more closely. It had expired overnight, its legs curled up in a grotesque rigor mortis. Another failure. "It's only natural for her to be wary. We must make her understand that she has nothing to fear from us. We are trying to help her. After what she was exposed to, she could be in grave danger."

"You know as well as I do that if that spider bite was going to kill her, it most likely would have done so by now," Chara pointed out. "The very fact that she's still alive suggests that the danger has passed."

"Perhaps not entirely. Clearly there have already been side-effects, and we don't know to what extent. None of the other test subjects were...unchanged."

"You mean none of the other test subjects survived more than a day," Chara said bluntly. That had always been their manner: unflinching reality, in contrast to his own tendency to paper over the more unpleasant aspects of his work with clinical language and moral rationalization. They had seen the outcome of some of those past experiments and hadn't so much as flinched. Though he was no psychologist, Gaster sometimes suspected that Chara might be not just pragmatic, but a genuine sociopath. It was one of the things he found so refreshing about them.

"All the more reason to get Ms. Holiday here for some proper tests," he told them. "But what to do if she won't come of her own accord?"

"Maybe we could remove choice from the equation for her," Chara said. They held a small surgical scalpel in their hand and were slowly tilting it to catch the light. Where they had acquired such an item, Gaster didn't know, and he decided not to ask.

Gaster looked back at the TV, where Noelle was holding onto a webline and being flown around the room by the Condor. "If she's going to be running around in a mask now, she's bound to attract attention from unsavory characters like those criminals tonight. All the more reason why we ought to get to her first. For her own safety."

Chara flashed Gaster a grin that would have made his skin crawl, if he'd had any. "It would be one thing if she were just a schoolgirl, or the Mayor's daughter. But as a would-be superhero..."

"Ah," Gaster interrupted, "I see your reasoning. The anonymity of a mask brings with it certain vulnerabilities. A very clever idea, Chara." An idea he had led them to, but Gaster had long since learned that people responded better when you framed your ideas as their own. No one liked being reminded that they weren't the smartest person in the room.

While the human beamed at the compliment, he paused to consider for a moment, steepling his bony fingers under his chin. "We'll keep her under observation and give her a few days to get in touch with us of her own accord before resorting to anything drastic. But if she doesn't come to us willingly, I'll need a Plan B to have her brought safely here. Emphasis on 'safely' - I don't want her harmed. As far as I'm concerned, that girl is the most valuable property this company has."

Chara hummed thoughtfully. "Given what she just did to a roomful of armed thugs, if you want to go that route, then we'll need some...professional services. I know who can help us get the job done, but you're not going to like it."

Gaster frowned. "The Kingpin? Really, Chara?"

"He's the big man in charge now," Chara said with a shrug. "If you're looking for services of an illegal nature, he's the guy you go through. And I have the contacts to get a message to him."

Gaster considered asking *why* they had such contacts, but quickly thought better of it. Chara had their secrets just like he had his, but so long as they remained a useful servant, he was willing to continue pretending to underestimate them.

"I just hate making deals with that man," Gaster said, clucking his tongue disapprovingly. "He always drives a hard bargain. Are you absolutely certain we can't handle this on our own?"

"Who's we?" Chara said. "If you want *me* to tangle with a superhero, I'm going to need a raise first. And probably a better health insurance policy." They spun their scalpel between their fingers like it was a fidget toy. "Besides, it's best if we go through an intermediary. Makes it harder to trace anything back to us."

“Very well,” Gaster sighed. “If we haven’t heard from Ms. Holiday in a few days, set up a meeting. I’ll speak to him myself.”

“Of course, boss,” Chara smiled. “Just leave it to me.”

They tucked the scalpel into their pocket and left, whistling a tune.

Gaster watched them go, then turned back to the screen and the heroic young figure dancing across it. “From failure, opportunity,” he mused quietly to himself. “How very, very ironic.”

A FEW DAYS LATER

Gaster got out of his parked limousine outside The Lion’s Thorn and adjusted the buttons of his suit jacket. He’d worn his finest all-black ensemble for this meeting, one that contrasted vividly with the bright white bone of his head and hands. Appearances mattered in situations like this, and it was important to convey that he was on an equal - albeit wholly different - playing field with the man he was about to meet.

“Wait here,” he told his driver, and then strode briskly into the upscale restaurant.

The Lion’s Thorn, named after a human fable about an escaped slave who generously aids an initially fearsome-looking lion monster with a thorn stuck in his paw, was located in one of the city’s majority-human districts. Although monsters and humans mingled freely throughout New Home City, in districts like this one, the ideal of peaceful monster-human cohabitation was woven into the very fabric of the neighborhood, from its statues and murals to the theming of its fine dining establishments. There were some who grumbled about the dilution of monster culture, but Gaster thought it was a fine thing; the two races had much to learn from one another.

The fact that the restaurant was also one of many money-laundering fronts for the Kingpin’s operations lent an ironic twist to its idealistic image, of course, but the food was still good.

“I have a reservation,” Gaster told the waiter, an aging but well-groomed human male. “I’m here to see the owner.”

“Of course, Mr. Gaster,” the man said with a slight bow. “We’ve been expecting you.”

“It’s Doctor,” Gaster corrected in a bone-dry tone.

The waiter bowed slightly lower. “*Doctor* Gaster. Come, he’s right this way.”

He led Gaster to a table in the back of the building, tucked slightly out of sight. Gaster spotted Asgore Dreemurr sitting there straight away. The man was hard to miss; enormous, rotund, and dressed in a suit as pristinely white as Gaster's was black.

"Gaster!" Asgore's voice boomed as he rose to greet him. "What an unexpected pleasure it was to hear from your secretary." He reached out his arm, hand extended. "How long has it been since we last spoke?"

"Too long," Gaster replied, letting Asgore's massive paw envelop his hand in a bone-crushing handshake. The man certainly had a tight grip, both metaphorically and literally. "I'm surprised you wanted to meet in public. What would the press think if they saw us dining together? You, a leading mayoral candidate, and me, a major donor to your incumbent opponent?"

Asgore laughed heartily. "They'd think that the election is just a few days away and I'm fishing for a last-minute endorsement. Never too late to change some hearts and minds, is it, Norman?"

"Except we both know you're not that desperate," Gaster pointed out. "You're ahead of Carol Holiday in all the polls."

"Why do you think I'm taking time out of my busy schedule to meet with you? I hope you've brought me some more interesting business to discuss than politics."

"Indeed I have," Gaster said, taking a seat at the table. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves." He opened the menu and perused the options unhurriedly. "I've not eaten here often. What would you recommend?"

"I'm partial to the lamb, myself," Asgore told him. He raised an eyebrow and added, "Not a vegetarian, are you, Doctor?"

"I'm not above eating meat," Gaster replied, "if the animal was slaughtered humanely."

"Yes, I've heard that about you. Doctor Gaster and his ethics." Asgore gave a wide smile. "You're an inspiration to us all."

"You look like the cat monster that ate the canary," Gaster said dryly. "Smugness isn't one of your better qualities, Dreemurr. Am I missing some sort of joke here?"

Asgore flagged down a passing server. "Let's save it for after the meal, shall we? I wouldn't want to put you off your appetite."

They put in their orders and made small talk for a while, enjoying wine and appetizers while they waited for the main course. The conversation was cordial but lightweight, Asgore telling stories from the campaign trail, Gaster sharing the more public and less secretive details of his recent research. Both of them danced politely around the matters of who exactly Asgore was and what exactly Gaster wanted from him; decorum was all part of the process when dealing with people like Dreemurr who fancied themselves kings among men.

Finally, when the food had arrived and they'd filled their bellies (Asgore more so than Gaster; the big man had a big appetite), Asgore wiped his mouth with a handkerchief and said, "So then, let's get down to brass tacks. I'm dying to know what prompted this little sit-down."

"It concerns NHC's newest self-styled superhero," Gaster said. "The one calling herself Spider-Doe."

Asgore's eyes were curious, but his bearded jaw worked angrily. "I'm familiar. I'm sure you know my stance on these costumed vigilantes. It's been a cornerstone of my campaign, after all."

"Oh, I'm well aware of your position on the issue of crime," Gaster said. With a polite cough, he added, "Even if most of the city has yet to be thoroughly educated on your beliefs."

"My record as police chief speaks for itself," Asgore said, taking a casual sip from his wine glass.

"I'm sure it does, if one looks closely enough. But then, you didn't have all these masked adventurers around back then to serve as a, hmm, a thorn in your paw, shall we say?"

"Ha!" Asgore roared. "That they are, aren't they?" He clenched his fist on the table. "If I could get my hands on that meddlesome Spider-Human..."

"I'm afraid I can't help you there. However..." Gaster politely arranged his used cutlery on his plate and gave it to the waiter who had swung by to clear the table. "What if I told you that I could help remove this newest thorn?"

"The girl?" Asgore narrowed his eyes. "How much do you know about her?"

"No more than you do, I'm sure. I know that unlike her human counterpart, she appears to be a young deer monster."

Asgore scoffed. "It's always the deer, isn't it? An overly curious subspecies. Always sticking their little red noses where they don't belong."

"Ah, yes," Gaster said delicately, "well, racial biases aside, the question isn't who this girl is so much as where she came from. And where she came from...is Gastcorp."

Asgore gave him a sharp glance, leaning forward slightly. "You mean..."

"I mean that I have reason to believe Spider-Doe acquired her powers through exposure to a top-secret Gastcorp research project. Quite accidental, I assure you. But that makes her an unwitting test subject in a very important experiment. I want her delivered securely back to my facilities, alive and unharmed. I'm told that you can help with acquiring and transporting such, erm, unique goods."

A deep belly laugh wracked Asgore's body. "Oh, that's very good, Doctor. Very rich, coming from a man like you. You're correct, however. I do have people in

my employ who occasionally dabble in providing such services.” He leaned back, folding his thick arms across his chest. “I can help you. For a price.”

Gaster had been expecting this, and decided to cut to the chase. Negotiations were so tedious. “I’m prepared to offer a vial of the girl’s blood, along with proof of its authenticity.”

Asgore held his calm, controlled posture, but Gaster saw a flash of greed light up his eyes. “That’s quite the offer. Just one vial, though? I assume you have your own designs for the rest.”

“One vial alone should be enough to fetch a small fortune on the appropriate markets,” Gaster pointed out. “The doe herself is proof that my formula works, for those with the means to unlock her blood’s secrets. You’re welcome to take a stab at that yourself, if you’re feeling ambitious. You may lack Gastcorp’s resources, but my company has never been afraid of a little competition. That’s what drives innovation, after all...or so I’ve been hearing in the stump speeches lately.”

“Well, it’s a very interesting idea you’ve laid in front of me here,” Asgore said, chewing on the last of his lamb. “One question occurs to me, however: What’s to stop me from taking the girl myself and keeping her oh so scientifically significant body out of your hands?”

“If you hold up your end of the bargain, you’ll get your pound of flesh - or vial of blood, as it were. Renege on the deal, however, and you may not like the consequences.” Gaster leaned closer, looking Asgore in the flinty eye. “You haven’t won the election *yet*, Asgore. There’s still time for a last-minute development to upend this race.”

Asgore looked unfazed. “Election or no election, I’m a dangerous man to make an enemy of, Norman. I know where your own skeletons are buried. This lab deer of yours...I know what courses through her veins. What forces your company has been playing with. And I know what happened to the human ‘volunteers’ who contributed to your research.”

“*What?*” Gaster hissed, throwing his chair back and getting to his feet. “How could you possibly -”

“I know everything that goes on in my city,” Asgore said calmly. “I suppose you thought a few homeless humans wouldn’t be missed. Oh, I’ve no doubt you offered to compensate them quite generously for their service to science, not that it mattered in the end.”

Gaster glared at him, the pretext of civility dropped. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Asgore laid his arms out in front of him, palms up. All cards on the table. “Relax. I get it, Norman. Whatever helps you sleep at night. The thing is, while you may own the company, you’re not the only member of the board. How many of them know the truth behind your experiments, I wonder? How many shareholders *really* know what they’re investing in? You’ve had your fair share of PR disasters

recently..." He shook his head in a show of mock sympathy. "You're steering your ship through choppy waters, Norman, and corporate mutinies have been known to happen during times like these."

"On what evidence are you basing these accusations? Answer me, Asgore, or so help me..."

"Let me stop you before you say something regrettable," Asgore interrupted. "I have my sources, which should come as no surprise to you. You of all people should know that knowledge is power. I merely deal in more practical knowledge, while you seek the pursuit of theoretical knowledge."

"Don't embarrass yourself by pretending that we're similar," Gaster seethed. "I serve a higher purpose, the advancement of society. You wrap yourself in a cloak of luxury to hide the stink of society's filthy underbelly, furthering no cause save your own ill-gotten gains. We are not alike, *Kingpin*."

Asgore looked amused. "You have no idea what higher purposes I serve. And yet, proud as you are, you're willing to come to me for help. You needn't look so put out, Norman. I wasn't trying to insult you. I know your intentions are noble, and I actually admire your willingness to get your hands dirty."

"So, that's how it's to be, then, is it? A partnership based on the threat of mutually assured destruction?"

"An *understanding*," Asgore countered, "based on mutual gain. That's business, Doctor." He finally stood up. "I promise to deliver you your superhero before Election Day. I know just the man for the job, in fact. And in exchange, I'll take that blood sample that you so generously offered." With a chuckle, he added, "You can have it sent to City Hall."

"Then we have our terms," Gaster said tersely. "I'm glad we could find common ground."

They shook on it, Asgore's tight grip once again squeezing Gaster's hand more forcefully than necessary. "As am I, Doctor. So nice to catch up. After all, as your future Mayor, I'll soon be in a position to give Gastcorp either much more stringent oversight...or plenty of free rein. Perhaps this could be the start of a strong, mutually beneficial relationship."

"I suppose we'll find out," Gaster said. "As a man of science, I tend to believe only in that which I can see."

He could see Asgore Dreemurr very clearly at that moment. The sight turned his stomach.

Chapter 11: Lessons in Heroing

“Next lesson of spider-heroing,” Kris said, their voice muffled slightly by the mask. “Always be aware of your surroundings.”

“I’m *so* aware of my surroundings!” Noelle protested. Right now, on the street by the outer edge of New Home City’s biggest public park, it was mostly pigeons, joggers, and other passers-by who were either staring at them or paying them no mind. “I’m just not sure why we had to meet up at Middle Park for this.”

“Because being a superhero requires thinking fast in a chaotic environment,” Kris said, “and there’s no more chaotic environment than downtown Monsterhatten.”

“It just feels like we’re drawing attention...” Noelle muttered, trying not to stare at the crowd. She couldn’t help but wonder what they thought of her, especially after she’d finally finished sewing herself a proper costume. It was similar to Kris’s with the webbing pattern and the big white eyes, but she’d picked a unique color scheme: forest green with dark red highlights on the arms, legs and sides. She had further personalized her take on the costume by replacing the spider emblem on her back with stylized deer antlers. It had taken hours and a lot of accidentally stabbing herself with a sewing needle, but she was proud of the results.

Ironically though, despite the fact that she was wearing a mask, she felt very self-conscious being out in public dressed like that. A part of her still felt like she was just cosplaying a superhero, rather than standing on her own two hooves.

Training with Kris helped, though. At least when they actually took it seriously.

“Come on, Noelle, it’s NHC,” Kris said. “I bet we’re not even in the top five weirdest things these people have seen today.”

“Oh my gosh oh my gooooooosh!” a young fire elemental monster crackled, tugging on their mother’s arm and pointing at the two superheroes. “Look, look! It’s Spider-Human!”

“And Spider-Doe!” Noelle added with a friendly wave.

“Cinder, don’t talk to strangers in costumes!”

The child’s mother began pulling them along, but the kid kept waving frantically at Kris, their flaming head flaring up and turning blue. “I love you, Spider-Human!!”

Kris waved back. “And I love you, random citizen!”

“Hey, what about me? I was on the news!” Noelle called, but the kid was already lost in the crowd.

Kris patted her arm sympathetically. "It's okay, Noelle. Maybe one day you'll be popular like me."

"It's so weird that *you* have *fans*," Noelle complained. "I feel like I woke up in Bizarro World."

"Wrong universe," Kris said.

"Exactly!"

"No, I mean - you know what, never mind." Their voice took on a teasing edge. "Anyways, I seem to recall you being one of those fans not that long ago. What was it you said the first time you met Spider-Human? Something about how you lo-"

"L-Let's focus up here!" Noelle stammered. "Lessons. Training. You were saying something about situational awareness?"

"Oh, right, I was just saying that -" Suddenly Kris pointed over her shoulder. "Noelle, look out!!"

She spun on her hoof, arms raised defensively, but all she could see through the lenses of her mask was a whole lot of nothing there.

Kris cackled behind her, and Noelle rounded on them. "Oh haha, very funny! I should have known you were pranking me, my spider-sense didn't even tingle!"

"That's the point," Kris said. "You can't rely too much on your spider-sense. Sure, it'll tell you when you're in danger, but will it tell you which specific direction an attack is coming from? Will it highlight the best spots to attach a webline to if you're falling through the air? Nope. You gotta make those calls yourself, and that means always knowing what's around you."

Noelle thought back to the way that Condor had ambushed her on the rooftop at NHU, and begrudgingly sighed. "Okay, you have a point there."

"Of course I do," Kris said. "I'm the master of situational awareness." As they spoke, a pigeon that was poking around on the street flapped its wings and flew over, settling on Kris's head.

Noelle raised her hand to point. "You've got a, um..."

"I'm aware," Kris deadpanned. They held very still for a moment and then abruptly shook themselves, making the pigeon fly off. "Aw man, did it crap on me?" they asked, bending over and poking at the top of their mask. "It better not have crapped on me, I just washed this costume. I swear the birds in this city are all out to get me."

"Kris, focus!" Noelle giggled. "You're fine. Can we get back to the lessons?"

"Right! Lessons!" Kris said. "Okay, you'll love this one. Come on, let's get swinging."

They athletically hopped up onto a nearby street lamp and then jumped into the air, catching a building with a *THWIP* of webbing and swinging away over the street. Noelle followed as close behind as she could, trying to keep up. It still made her feel a bit motion sick, but she was getting used to it with practice as her body gradually learned to hold down its panic instincts and trust in the strength of her webs.

Once she and Kris had gotten into a steady rhythm of swinging (shoot, swing, release, shoot, swing, release), they shouted over to her through the roar of the wind, “Okay, now you go ahead of me and I’ll follow! See that skyscraper up ahead?”

“I see it!” Noelle shouted back. The building loomed overhead, a tall rectangle of smooth glass windows reflecting the light of the sun.

“We’re gonna swing to the side and then run right up to the top! I’ll be right behind you in case you fall!”

“What do you mean in case I fall?!”

“You won’t fall! It’ll be fine!”

Okay, Noelle told herself as the side of the building grew closer. She could do this. She’d stood on the wall before, this was just like that! Except running. Up glass and stuff. Very very high above the ground.

“Kriiiss!” she whined. “I can’t do this!”

“Yes you can!” Kris called from behind her. “Just start running and don’t stop until you’re at the top! Pretend you’re running track!”

“Running track. Right.” That was a normal thing to do. She was good at running. What difference did it make if it was on the ground or up the side of a building?

Noelle braced herself as she swung up parallel with the side of the skyscraper and let go of her webline. Her frame of reference for up and down lurched dizzily as she found herself staring up at the sky, a long flat expanse of glass and steel beneath her, stretching outwards - *upwards* - to the horizon.

And then her hooves connected with the side of the building and without taking the time to think about it, Noelle began to run. Forward, upward, onward, one foot in front of the other, and to her amazement she found that her hooves were sticking just enough, for just long enough, to let her own momentum overrule gravity. She was running straight upwards and yet it was as if her hooves were on solid ground.

“Woohoo!” she heard Kris shout from behind her. “You’re doing it, Noelle! Doesn’t it feel amazing?”

“It feels incredible!” Noelle shouted back. As she called to Kris, she looked over her shoulder to see how far behind her they were.

Immediately, and yet too late, she realized her mistake. The ground was so, so far below her, the rooftops stretching up behind her like reaching fingers. Her brain twisted to readjust her perception, her stomach lurching, and suddenly she was stumbling, tripping over her own hooves, and she had lost that momentum that was keeping her going. For just an instant too long, her hooves stopped sticking.

With a startled “eep!” Noelle began to fall backwards.

She reached out to secure herself to the building with a webline, but before she could, Kris slammed into her with a jarring thud, wrapping their arms around her waist as they continued to sprint upward. “I’ve got you! Just relax, we’re almost there.”

Noelle wrapped her arms around their neck and closed her eyes, feeling foolish. She was starting to lose track of all the times Kris had come to her rescue. She didn't want to need saving - she could have just made a web parachute again and survived the fall just fine on her own - but...well, it wasn't the worst thing in the world to have someone like them there to catch her when she fell.

A few seconds later, she felt Kris gently deposit her on the flat rooftop.

Noelle sat up dizzily, feeling a newfound appreciation for having solid ground under her. She pulled her mask off and sucked in a deep breath. The rooftop was warm from the sun, but the air way up here was crisp and windy and fresher than the smoggy air at lower elevations. Breathing it in helped settle her stomach.

“Sorry,” Kris apologized, plopping down next to her and taking their mask off as well. “I should have warned you not to look down, but you know, I kinda assumed it went without saying. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, I just...I forgot where I was for a second there. It felt a little *too* much like running track, I guess.” She exhaled, puffing out her cheeks. “How did you get used to this stuff, Kris? Does it ever stop making you feel like you want to hurl?”

“Eh, not really,” Kris admitted. “But you do get used to it. After a while it starts to feel like -” They paused, grasping for the right words. “It's like no matter how topsy-turvy things get, even when up is down and down is up, your center of balance is always the same because it's relative to you. Like a compass that always points north no matter how you spin it. Up is always *your* up, and that's the only up that matters.”

Noelle thought, but didn't say, that she thought her compass might be broken, but that Kris was a pretty good substitute for a center of balance.

“I’m glad I didn’t try to do this on a full stomach,” she said, laying down on her back. The rooftop was probably getting her brand new costume dirty, but she didn’t care. She needed to be horizontal for a minute after all that, to feel the sturdy surface beneath her.

“I like the haircut, by the way,” Kris said. “Looks cool. Very punk or whatever.”

“Oh, thanks!” Noelle ran her fingers through her short-cropped wave of golden hair, ending up brushing the buzz-cut scalp around her ears. The undercut felt strange to her, as did the lightness of her head now. All day long in class it had been a struggle not to rub it. “Dess and I couldn’t sleep last night, and somehow while we were up late talking, she managed to convince me that short hair would make wearing a mask easier.”

“So you said screw it and let her take a razor to your head?”

“Pretty much! It does make the mask more comfortable, she was right about that. Mom’s probably going to freak out when she sees it, but I’ll deal with that later.” Noelle sat up and idly began to play with Kris’s hair, her gloved fingers catching in their knotted waves of brown. “You know, I bet Dess would do the same for you if you asked.”

“Uhhh,” Kris said, “no offense, Noelle, but it’ll be a cold day in hell when I let your sister anywhere near my hair with a pair of scissors.”

Noelle giggled. “Afraid she’ll try and get payback for that time you filled my shampoo bottle with green hair dye?”

“I can’t believe she’s still mad about that!” Kris said defensively. “I thought the green looked very festive on you.”

“I looked like a walking Christmas tree!”

“I knooooow!” Kris snorted. “It was hilarious.”

“You kept trying to hang ornaments from my hair!” Noelle pouted, but Kris had descended into a self-satisfied giggle fit, and she couldn’t help but smile.

Her stomach rumbled hungrily and she lay back down on the ground, resting her hand on her belly; she was still getting used to her newly toned body and the new metabolism that kept demanding food. “Man, all this running up buildings takes a lot out of you, doesn’t it?”

“Oh yeah,” Kris nodded. “The need for calories is constant. If you’re hungry we could take a snack break? I think I saw a hot dog stand a couple blocks back.”

“That sounds awesome,” Noelle said. “Only...I don’t think I’m ready to go back down yet.” She knew she would have to get down somehow, but her stomach wasn’t settled enough yet to go jumping off this skyscraper.

“If you want to stay here and take five, I can go get us something,” Kris offered. “We can have a rooftop picnic! Oh, and then after that I can show you some webbing techniques!”

Noelle propped herself up and shaded her face with her hand to smile at them. “You’re the best, Kris.”

“Speak nothing of it. You want ketchup with your hot dog?”

“Of course!”

“I’ll be back in a flash, then!” Kris said, and dove headfirst off the roof like it was the easiest thing in the world.

Noelle lay back, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the view of the fluffy white clouds above her. She had to admit, when she wasn’t zipping around through the sky, trusting her life to thin strands of adhesive, it felt pretty nice to be up so high above the city that the air smelled cleaner and the sounds of traffic all melted away. It was peaceful up here.

She put her hands behind her head like a makeshift pillow, scratching at the back of her scalp again. She couldn’t believe she had let Dess cut her hair. She couldn’t believe Kris thought it looked cool.

It was so weird how easily she was getting used to all this. It had been barely more than a week since the accident at Gastcorp, and now she was a superhero, with another superhero for a best friend. How strange that her brain was already reconciling the concepts of ‘Spider-Human’ and ‘Kris’ to be one and the same. Last week, when they had told her their secret, she hadn’t thought she would ever be able to pick her jaw off the ground.

And yet so much about Kris made so much more sense now. The way they sometimes disappeared in the middle of the school day or ran off as soon as the bell rang. The way they always seemed exhausted. The way they’d always managed to defend her from Susie despite being a third the dragon girl’s size at best.

Wait. Susie...

Noelle frowned. With everything else going on, she had forgotten all about it, but when she had caught Kris with those bruises, they’d claimed they’d gotten them from being beaten up by Susie. But that didn’t make sense anymore. Kris tangled with supervillains on a regular basis; they had super speed and agility and a spider-sense that made fighting a normal person feel like getting attacked in slow-motion. No way would Susie be able to lay a finger on them if they didn’t want her to. And when Noelle had told Principal Toriel, and she had suspended Susie over it, Susie had insisted that she was innocent...

But if that was true, and Susie hadn’t done anything to Kris at all, then it was hard to believe they would let the false accusation ruin her life. They were supposed to be a hero! Justice and dishonesty didn’t exactly mix.

Her train of thought was broken by Kris vaulting up over the edge of the roof, their mask pulled up just far enough to hold a hot dog clenched between their teeth. They handed a second one in its wrapper to Noelle. “Here you go! Extra ketchup, like you like it.”

The enticing aroma of warm food temporarily drove all thought of Susie from Noelle’s mind as she unwrapped her meal. She was about to take a big bite when she hesitated and glanced up at Kris. “You, uh, you promise this is ketchup on here and not hot sauce?”

“Noelle, you wound me. Of course it’s not hot sauce. Why would a hot dog cart even *have* hot sauce?”

Noelle finally took a bite, mumbling something through her mouthful of food about how some people might want spicy hot dogs. But she was relieved to find that true to their word, Kris had snuck nothing more devious onto her dog than a bucketload of ketchup. She supposed that if she could trust them with her life, she should probably start trusting them with her food.

They ate in silence together for a while, Noelle focusing hard on not spilling any ketchup on her new superhero costume. Kris, she noted, was taking far less care; dirty costumes were probably old hat to them (that, or they just didn't have a mother who liked to impress on them the importance of keeping their appearance neat and tidy at all times).

Once she had finished eating, however, she couldn't justify putting off the question any longer. She drew in a deep breath and asked, “Hey, Kris? Did your mom say anything to you about Susie?”

“Oh,” Kris said, looking away. “Um. I guess I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.”

Noelle waited for them to go on, but the seconds dragged on in silence, so she asked, “And, uh, why haven't you?”

Kris turned to face her. “Look, I know what you're going to say, Noelle, but Susie was a bully. I might have been lying about her beating me up, but she really did try to hit you that day, didn't she? She would have gotten herself suspended eventually anyways, it was only a matter of time.”

“Maybe,” Noelle said, “but you shouldn't let her take the fall for something she didn't do. It's...not very superheroic of you.”

“I wasn't trying to get her in trouble,” Kris protested. “I told you to keep it between us! It wouldn't have been a problem if you hadn't told my mom.”

“*Hey*,” Noelle said sternly, getting to her hooves. With Kris still sitting down, she could really tower over them - and even when they stood up to face her, she was still looking down. “Don't try to put the blame on me when you're the one who lied. I was just looking out for you! If I had known you had superpowers, maybe I wouldn't have been so worried.”

“I'm sorry I lied, okay?” Kris said. They began to pace back and forth across from her, like they had pent-up energy that they had to get out somehow. “I should have told you sooner, I get that now. But sometimes you have to lie when you're, you know, the way we are. You may not like it, but you do it anyway, because the lie keeps people safe.”

“Safe from super-villains?”

Kris nodded. “If my enemies found out who I was, they could go after the people I care about.”

“You mean like how your crime lord father has been blackmailing my sister?”

Kris faltered. “That's not -”

“Or how those same evil plots almost got me blown up at Gastcorp? Or how the Condor almost killed me while I was trying to protect Dess?”

“None of those things were my fault!”

Noelle softened her tone. “I’m not saying they were, Kris. That's the point. All of that happened *before* you told me your secret. The lies weren't keeping me safe, they were just keeping us apart.” She took a step towards them, reaching down to take Kris’s hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. “Don't you think we're stronger when we're a team? When we're honest with each other?”

At first Kris moved to pull their hand away, but Noelle didn't let them, and after a moment, they stopped resisting and returned her firm squeeze. They blushed a little, perhaps from embarrassment or perhaps from shame, as they said, “So, what, do you think I should tell my mom the truth too?”

“I don't know,” Noelle shrugged. “Maybe. But I can't make that kind of decision for you, Kris. It's your life.” She thought about what she was saying for a second and added, “I know I don't want to tell mine.”

Kris snorted and shook their head. “Your mom would never let you leave the house again if she knew. And mine would be worrying about me all the time. I don't want to do that to her.”

“Well, I think you should at least confess that you lied about Susie. Tell her you got those injuries doing something stupid and embarrassing and you lied to me about it to make yourself sound tough and cool instead.”

Kris snatched their hand away, scowling.

Noelle giggled. “What? It’d be totally believable!”

“I *am* tough and cool...” Kris grumbled under their breath. “Fine, whatever. I’ll try and fix it. But you realize Susie hates both of us, right? She's probably going to pick a fight the moment she's back in school.”

“So what?” Noelle shrugged. “I’ve fought real-life supervillains now. I'm not afraid of the school bully. Besides, she was never *that* scary.”

“Are you kidding? She has all those teeth! And she keeps talking about biting my face off!”

“Fahaha!” Noelle laughed. “Don't tell me the big brave superhero is afraid of a single high school girl!”

“She's a really mean girl!” Kris sputtered indignantly. “Just because you're a freak like that doesn't mean I’m into it.”

“Shut uppp!” Noelle said, elbowing them in the ribs. “Look, I’m just saying, you’ve got enough enemies as it is. Maybe Susie doesn’t need to be one of them. If we try to bury the hatchet with her, maybe we can stop looking over our shoulders at school. Might be nice to have more friends there, don’t you think?”

Kris looked skeptical, to say the least. “You really think Susie and I could be friends?”

“Stranger things have happened. A lot of them just in the last couple weeks. I didn’t expect your dad to be a crime boss, either, but here we are.”

Kris laughed lightly. “Alright, point taken. You know, Noelle, I think we’re gonna make a good team.”

Team. The word had an unexpectedly uplifting effect on Noelle, like a little strand of warmly glowing holiday lights had just wrapped itself around her heart and given it a squeeze. Kris wasn’t just her hero, or even her friend. They could be teammates. Partners. “Oh? W-why is that?”

Kris shot a devilish grin at her. “I could use an angel on my shoulder. Sounds like evilness runs in my family, after all.”

Noelle decided not to spoil the joke by pointing out that they were adopted. “I always wondered where you got that wicked streak from! I’m surprised you didn’t make a red costume with little horns and call yourself Spider-Devil or something.”

“Damn, I should have thought of that. At the rate us super-types are popping up, I’m sure someone else will have cornered the market on that gimmick before long.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Noelle pulled them into a side-hug. “I’m glad you turned out to be one of the good ones, Kris.”

“God, me too,” Kris said. “Otherwise I’d have to either do the devil thing or dress all angsty like your sister, and honestly, black’s just not my color.”

“Good for stealth though,” Noelle said. “You’d be like a sneaky little spider ninja.” She turned to look out at the setting sun painting the sky in hues of orange and purple, the colors reflected back by a thousand high-rise windows. “It’s getting dark. I should probably get home before my mom starts worrying about me.”

“Yeah, same,” Kris said. “Mom hates it when I’m late for dinner.”

“You’ll tell her the truth about Susie?”

Kris nodded. “I promise.”

“Good,” Noelle said. “Oh, before you go! Don’t forget we’re meeting up at Asriel’s tomorrow evening to go over the Kingpin plan.”

“What plan? It’s like, half a concept at this point, and all the best bits are mine.”

Noelle raised her arms in frustration. “Well it won't *become* a plan if we don't brainstorm it together! We don't have a lot of time left before the election.”

“Don't worry, we'll figure something out,” Kris said, but there was an uncertain note in their voice. They sure didn't sound like someone who wasn't worried.

It was enough to make Noelle decide to gently press the issue. She took a step closer to them to be heard over the wind and said lightly, “How are you holding up with the whole...your dad situation?” Kris had been keeping her so busy with superhero training that they hadn't really talked about it, not since that night at Asriel's.

Kris's expression darkened. “I'm... I don't know. It's kind of a lot.”

“It is,” Noelle agreed. She waited a moment for them to continue.

“I keep thinking I'm fine, that I've processed it, and then I remember all over again and I just get so *angry*,” Kris blurted out.

This was something Noelle understood. She felt much the same every time her brain decided to remind her of her father's murder. “What do you do when you feel that way?”

“Put on this costume and go find a bad guy to punch, usually.”

“That might not be the best form of therapy.”

“No,” Kris admitted, “but it's the cheapest.” The joke landed with a thud, and they turned away with a sigh and went to stand at the roof's edge, looking out at the city. Noelle followed, standing beside them in supportive silence. The sun was slowly sinking lower in the sky, but she wasn't in such a hurry to get home anymore. Not if Kris had stuff they needed to get off their chest.

After a while, Kris added, “I just... I keep thinking about everything I remember from when I was a kid, everything about Dad, and feeling the connections snap into place and realizing, ‘Oh yeah, maybe he was always kind of a shitty person.’ And I hate it.”

Noelle frowned. “He was never that bad to you though, right?”

“He was and he wasn't,” Kris said. “Like, do you remember when we were little, and I would wear that horned headband everywhere because I thought I was a goat monster like my family? Like it was just a placeholder until my real horns grew in one day?”

Noelle nodded. “You really, really wanted to be a monster. And I guess Azzy and your mom and everyone thought there wasn't any harm in playing along, at least until you got old enough to understand. Though...” She frowned, thinking back on the old memories. “I do remember you acting...weird, once you grew up and stopped wearing it.” That had been about the time when she had stopped having playdates with Kris as often, around when their parents had gotten divorced. They had drifted apart for a few years after that, at least until high school.

"I stopped wearing it because of Dad," Kris said. "He and Mom always disagreed on how to raise me. Mom usually won those arguments though, and I was just an oblivious kid most of the time, so I didn't always notice when they fought. But there was this one time..."

"I remember overhearing their raised voices in the kitchen one night. Asriel stayed asleep, but I snuck out of my room to eavesdrop. They were talking about me and my horns. Mom kept saying that it was fine, that if I wanted to be a monster then they could just treat me like a monster, that the whole point of adopting me was to make me feel like I belonged, regardless of what I looked like. But Dad disagreed. Said they had been indulging a fantasy for too long. That I was a human and I needed to understand my place in the world. That I would never be a monster like them and it was wrong of me to pretend otherwise. That it was perverse. That's the word he used. I don't think I even knew what that word meant at the time, but I never forgot it.

"I didn't sleep at all that night, and I threw the headband away the next morning. Because if my own dad didn't see me as a monster, how could I still see myself that way? I couldn't keep pretending anymore.

"Then when I got my powers, well... I never wanted to be special, you know? I never wanted to not fit in. But then there I was with yet another thing making me abnormal. Not just different but like...a freak.

"I think that's why I decided to call myself Spider-Human, to put it right there in the name. I still kind of hate it when people make me feel like a human. But Spider-Human isn't Kris. They're the part of me that's different. The part that's someone with the wrong face, or...or no face at all, just a mask. And I'm just trying to make something good out of that part of me. To make them someone I don't have to feel ashamed of."

They turned to face Noelle, there on the edge of the roof in the orange light of the sunset, and she saw tears flowing freely, streaking their cheeks. "But I still feel ashamed sometimes, and I got that shame from my dad. I...I was never supposed to feel that way about myself! I just wish he could have loved me for who I *wanted* to be."

Noelle very gently stepped away from the ledge, pulling Kris down with her by their hand, and then wrapped her arms around them and pulled them into a hug. Kris let out a little sob and snuggled closer, their face pressed into her shoulder.

"You know it doesn't matter where you come from, right, Kris?" she said after a while, when they had relaxed into her body and stopped crying. "Human or monster, adopted or not, you're an amazing person and people love you. This whole city loves you! They don't even know what you look like, but they love you anyway, not for being a human but for being a *hero*. And I promise you, the people who do know you - *all* of you, the *real* you..."

She pulled away from their embrace, just slightly, just enough to put her hand against their cheek and look into their eyes. "Those people love you too."

Kris sniffled and blinked, staring up at her like they were seeing her for the first time. Were they blushing or was it just the sunset coloring their face?

And then they stood up on their tip-toes, put their arms around her neck, and kissed her.

Noelle froze like a deer in headlights, surprise making her body rigid and tense. Her brain couldn't quite process what was happening, sending her thoughts into a jumbled frenzy of indecisive panic.

Kris must have felt her body's stiff non-reaction, because they quickly retreated, removing their lips from her mouth with a flurry of apologies. "Fuck, I'm sorry, Noelle, I don't know why I did that. I must have misread the uh, haha, um, let's just forget that ever happened!"

They were bright red in the face and she was pretty sure it wasn't the sunset. Their wide, embarrassed eyes reflected her own panic back at her, and it was that, more than anything else, that snapped her out of it.

"No no no," she rushed to reassure them, "i-it's okay! Not your fault, I just, I wasn't ready. You really took me by surprise there, fahaha! But um...just give me a moment and, um..." She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heartbeat. "Um...gosh."

"Are you...good?" Kris questioned tentatively.

"Yeah! Yeah I'm good, I'm just...psyching myself up, haha!"

"For what?"

Noelle squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't deal with them looking at her when she said this. "To...ask if you want to try that again?" Her voice pitched upward as she spoke, squeaking on the last word.

There was a long couple seconds of agonizing silence. Noelle opened one curious eye, peeking out just in time to see a happy grin on Kris's face, right as they leaned in to kiss her again.

This time, Noelle was *kind of* ready.

They kissed her softly, for someone with super strength. It wasn't a kiss of fiery passion. It was a kiss of appreciation. A kiss that said *I know you care, and I care too*.

Noelle melted into Kris's lips, and pulled them close, and closed her eyes. She didn't open them again for what felt like a long time, not until the sun had sunk below the skyline and the stars had come out. But when she finally did, she could still see Kris smiling up at her, their face inches from her own, illuminated by the gentle red glow of her nose.

They booped the tip of their button nose against her glowing one, and Noelle laughed and smiled back at them, with everything in her.

It was well after dark by the time Kris got home. They were definitely late for dinner, and they totally did not care. How could they care about anything else, when they had *KISSED NOELLE???*

They weren't even hungry. They felt like they could have sustained themselves entirely off of Noelle kisses. It had only been the threat of her getting in trouble with her mom for staying out late that had finally convinced them to part ways for the night.

The cover of night helped them approach their house and sneak through their bedroom window unseen so they could quietly change out of their costume. They then slipped back out the window, down the side of the house, and around to the front door. A somewhat convoluted way of returning home, but it was always important to maintain the illusion that they were coming and going in a normal manner, especially when people were waiting for them.

Just before they could unlock the door, a buzzing from their backpack alerted them to notifications on their phone. Probably Noelle texting them. Best to just answer her now, Kris figured. As much as they wanted to spend dinner texting her under the table, their mother had a strict 'no phones during meals' rule, and they were probably in enough trouble for being late as it was.

They took a moment on the front porch to unlock their phone and take a peek. After swiping away all the notifications from Monster Discord, a couple text messages jumped out at them. Neither was from Noelle, though. One was from their mother:

Kris dear; I know you are "hanging out" with Noelle after school today, but please do not be late for dinner. Your

The rest was cut off by the notification window. Immediately after (that is to say, chronologically beforehand) was a text from Asriel:

omg Kris I just wanted to give you a heads up I just got a text from Mom inviting me to the house for dinner tonight and

Oh hey, Asriel's here. No point standing around in the cold any longer, then. Contented that there had been no emergencies in their absence, Kris shoved their phone in their pocket, fished out their house key, and unlocked the door.

Warmth and the smell of fresh-made food flooded their senses. "Hey mom, sorry I'm late for din-" they started to say as they kicked the door shut behind them.

Kris froze when they looked across the room into the kitchen. Their mother was seated on one side of the table, smiling at them. Opposite her sat Asriel, who was looking at them with wide eyes and biting his lip in that anxious way he always did when something was distressing him.

And at the head of the table, facing all of them, sat their father.

“There they are!” Asgore boomed, his voice as loud and jocular as ever, like nothing had changed between them - because from his perspective, nothing had. He had no idea that his children had learned his darkest secrets. “Don’t worry, Kris, you’re just in time. Come dig in before it gets cold!”

Well, #\$@,* Kris thought. The Dreemurrs were no strangers to awkward family dinners, but nothing about their parent’s divorce had prepared Kris for this.

They were already regretting not staying up on that rooftop with Noelle.

Kris took their seat opposite Asgore and forced themselves to brush their hair out of their eyes and give their father a thin smile. “Hi, Dad.”

Chapter 12: Family Business

I should have stayed on that rooftop, Kris thought ruefully. I could be kissing Noelle right now, instead of thinking about how much I want to flip this table and punch my father in the face.

Oh well. If they survived dinner, they'd get their chance at both of those activities later.

"So, uh, what are you doing here?" Kris asked their father, carefully holding their voice at their usual steady monotone and avoiding looking at Asgore while they served themselves a plate of food. "I thought family dinner night was next week. Pass the potato salad, Azzy?"

Asriel passed the bowl, mouthing, *Did you get my text?* Kris really needed him to stop looking so uncomfortable before Asgore realized there was something more at play here than the usual awkwardness of dinner with one's divorced parents.

"What," Asgore said, "did you think I would be too busy in the final days of my campaign to spend time with my children?"

"Kinda, yeah," Kris said through a mouthful of potato salad. "I wasn't expecting you. Didn't see your car outside." *Didn't get a warning from my spider-sense, either. Guess my dad being a bad guy doesn't mean he's a threat to me - at least not when I don't have my costume on.*

"I had my driver drop me off," Asgore explained. "Traffic across the bridge is murder this time of day. As for the campaign, at this late stage I've made my closing arguments, and there's not much left to do except wait for the votes to be cast. If things go the way I expect them to the day after tomorrow, I will be a lot busier going forward, so I figured I should get in some family time while I can. Consider it a celebration."

"That seems somewhat premature," Toriel said. "You are confident about your chances then, I take it?" Her tone and expression were well-mannered, but in the slightly forced, inorganic way that Kris had learned meant she wasn't saying what she was really thinking.

Asgore knew her well enough to notice it too, but he ignored it. "If all the polls are to be believed, then yes. Carol Holiday's a tough opponent, I'll admit, but I have the momentum right now."

"Well, er, polls can be misleading," Asriel piped up between mouthfuls. He had been quietly focusing on his plate, but apparently his newfound fear of his father was outweighed by the interests of the polisci major in him. "We all saw what happened a couple of Monster Presidential elections ago."

"Smart lad," Asgore said approvingly, making Asriel flush and glance down, a conflicted expression on his face. Asgore seemed too animated by the discussion

to notice. "It's true that polls aren't everything."

He took his knife and fork and carved off a slice of salmon from his plate. "So, if opinion polling isn't always a reliable predictor of electoral results, what other factors can you use to predict the outcome?" He aimed the question at his children, waiting expectantly for a response.

Asriel still looked uncomfortable though, and Kris understood why. Their father was behaving as he always had - turning conversations into teachable moments, encouraging them to reason and think things through - but it felt somehow more sinister now. Kris wondered if their dad really did have a normal paternal interest in helping develop their knowledge and critical thinking skills, or if he viewed them as heirs to mold into his likeness. Did he think one or both of them might one day be taken into the 'family business,' groomed to be successors to the empire he was building?

"Well? Anyone?" Asgore probed.

"Perhaps we should refrain from talking politics at the dinner table," Toriel started to say, but Asgore held up a paw to silence her.

"No no, Tori," he said, while his ex-wife visibly chafed at the dismissal. "This stuff is important. I want to hear what the kids think."

"M-media coverage?" Asriel said, his voice meek.

While at the same time, Kris spoke up and said confidently, "Emotions."

Asgore pointed his fork at them, like a teacher calling on a student. "Kris, elaborate."

"Well..." Kris said, poking at the food on their plate while they took a second to question how much they could get away with saying. "People don't always vote based on facts. They vote based on what they *feel* to be true. Take Mayor Holiday, for instance. All this stuff you keep saying at your rallies about superheroes and supervillains, blaming her for letting them all run amok. And yet, statistics show that violent crime has actually decreased overall since Spider-Human started doing their thing."

"Costumed super-criminals have been popping up like weeds under Carol Holiday's watch," Asgore pointed out, seamlessly shifting into campaign speechifying mode. "And every time they clash, people and property get caught in the crossfire. You don't think the Mayor has a responsibility to keep the city safe from that kind of chaos?"

"Sure, but look at the language you're using. Scary words like 'chaos' and 'crossfire' make people feel afraid, regardless of how safe they actually are or aren't."

There's a lot of power in words, Kris thought. Words like 'wrong' and 'perverse' and 'human.' The right words can make people feel things they never would have felt on their own.

Asgore looked at them thoughtfully. “You don’t think I’m being fair to Mayor Holiday?”

“That’s not the point.” Kris took a deep breath, tamping down their frustration. This was more words than they usually liked to say out loud in one stretch, especially to their father. “I think you’re being a politician. Or at least, one kind of politician. You know how to work a crowd. Carol’s more experienced but she’s not that charismatic or likable.”

They shot an awkward glance at Toriel, who still maintained a cordial friendship with Carol Holiday, since both pairs of their children were friends. “Er, don’t tell her I said that, Mom.”

Toriel, for the first time that evening, looked amused. “Fear not, my child, your secret is safe with me.”

“The point is,” Kris finished, “people care less about who a candidate is or what they’ve done than about how that person makes them feel. Whoever controls the emotional narrative gets the votes.”

If only there was some way to control your narrative so you couldn’t lie to people anymore.

Asgore looked at Kris with a shrewd admiration, like he was recalibrating his opinion of his youngest child in real time. “That’s very insightful, Kris. I may have underestimated you. Here you are, still a teenager, and you understand more about politics than most adults.”

“Guess I’ve just given it a lot of thought,” Kris shrugged, turning their attention back to their food in a nonchalant way, as though to suggest that none of this was all that important to them.

What they were thinking, but didn’t say, is that they’d gained a first-hand understanding of how public perception works from the reaction to Spider-Human, a subject that they’d followed closely in their first couple years of crime-fighting. They’d gradually gained recognition and appreciation for their heroic deeds, but it hadn’t always been that way. All those hyperbolic, fear-mongering Monster Bugle headlines in the early days had really hurt their image.

“Maybe you should be the one majoring in political science instead of your brother,” their father suggested. Asriel, still staring at his plate, seemed to deflate a little.

Kris bit their lip. “I was actually thinking of a career in photojournalism.”

“Not much money in that,” Asgore said dismissively.

“I guess not,” Kris said. They raised their eyes for a change, to stare directly at their father with the one eye not covered by a cascade of messy brown hair. “But not everything is about money, Dad.”

“That is right,” Toriel said in a pointedly polite tone. “Kris should follow their passions, don’t you agree?”

"Of course," Asgore said. "I'm only saying that they should be smart about it. Pursue something practical that's within their means. They clearly have a mind for politics, and there's plenty of positions for staffers..."

"You should let your children make their own choices, Asgore. Kris can be whatever they want to be."

"No no, I'm starting to see Dad's point," Kris grinned. "Politics seems like fun. Maybe one day I'll follow in Dad's footsteps and be the first human mayor of NHC. That would be pretty cool, huh Dad?"

Their mother smiled, but Asgore didn't seem to find the idea amusing. "I'm not sure if that would be the best fit for -"

"Y-you know, Dad," Asriel said, raising his voice unexpectedly and cutting Asgore off. "Mayor Holiday does have one advantage that you don't."

"And what's that?" Asgore asked, turning to his son. His tone remained light, but was Kris imagining it or had their father's eyes just gotten subtly colder? Although their spider-sense still wasn't giving off so much as a tickle, they shivered a little, something clenching in anxiety inside their gut.

"A good story," Asriel said. "She has a loving family torn apart by tragedy, and we just have...well, this," he finished sadly, looking back and forth between his divorced, squabbling parents. Toriel looked like she couldn't wait for the meal to be over; Kris didn't know how much she knew, but either way, they couldn't blame her. Was this feeling the reason their parents had divorced in the first place? Had their mother come to suspect that she didn't really know her husband like she thought she had? She couldn't have known the full story, or she would never have allowed him back in her home again.

"The Holiday family's not without its warts," Asgore said, unable to hide his derision. "Noelle's a good kid, but her sister's a trainwreck waiting to happen." He shrugged his huge shoulders at the look on Asriel's face, mistaking the reasons for his son's anger. "I'm sorry, Asriel, I know she's your friend but it's true. December is living proof that Carol Holiday is far from a perfect parent."

"You are one to talk," Toriel snapped. "And you know what a hard time of things the Holidays have had lately. Those poor girls lost their father, for Angel's sake."

"Hey, Dad..." Asriel said slowly. "Do you think you would still have run against Carol if Rudy was alive? I know you guys used to be friends."

Asgore took a deep breath in and out. Kris didn't know whether to kick Asriel under the table or admire him for taking the opportunity. He had phrased it like an innocent question, but Kris knew that he was thinking of the same thing they were: Dess's suspicion, denied but never disproven, that Kingpin may have had a hand in her father's death.

Kris didn't want to believe that their dad was capable of murder, but now that they knew how many secrets Asgore was keeping, it raised the question of how far he would go to keep them. And Rudy - as far as they knew - had been a good

man; not someone who would have let his best friend's criminal ambitions go unchallenged, had he known about them.

"I valued my friendship with Rudolph very highly," Asgore finally said. "I never wanted anything to come between us. He was...an opinionated man, and we didn't always see eye to eye, especially on politics. I wish I could say I was running to honor his memory, but in truth, I doubt he would have supported my campaign. I just wish I'd had the chance to change his mind."

"I miss him too, you know," Kris said softly. They kept their tone mild, as always. Feelings and secrets hidden beneath the surface, as always. But they wanted to see how their father would react. "He was like an uncle to me. Uncle Rudy, always there for us...until someone took him away. I don't think I'll ever forget the way Noelle cried at the funeral." They clenched their fists under the table, looking down so that their hair would hide the tears welling in their eyes. "You don't know how many times I've wished I could find the person responsible and...and..."

And oh god, what would they do if that person turned out to be their father?

"Vengeance is an understandable urge, Kris," Asgore said in a deep rumble. "But it's better for all of us if we put the past behind us and move on. To dwell on it would be...unproductive."

There was a subtle note of warning in his voice, one that Kris might not have even detected had it not been for their spider-sense finally giving a belated tingle across their scalp. They felt their blood turn to ice in their veins.

And then they felt it turn hot with rage, because they *knew*, deep in their innermost instinctive core, that their father knew more than he was telling. What role had Rudy played in all this? What could have compelled Asgore to turn his back on his friend and lie to his family? Was there any part of the father from memory that was even real?

But this was not the moment for a confrontation, nor were they given the chance.

"I think we should also move on from this conversation," Toriel interrupted before Kris could say anything. "That is quite enough talk of politics and tragedy for one night. I would like to focus on something more positive. Asriel, how is university going? Are you enjoying your classes?"

"Oh! Um, well..." Asriel mumbled, caught off-guard by the abrupt change in subject.

Kris, on the other hand, was grateful for it. With everyone's attention on Asriel, no one noticed them angrily bending and unbending their fork under the table.

The conversation continued for a few minutes, while Kris ate in tense silence. They had lost their appetite, but the quicker they finished eating, the sooner they could be excused. Once it had started, the buzzing in their skull didn't want to stop, and they needed to put some space between themselves and their father before they did something unwise.

As soon as they were done eating, Kris dropped their plate in the kitchen sink and retreated to the bathroom. Then they pulled out their phone, opened it to the group text labeled *The Hologays*, and sent a message to Dess and Noelle:

KRIS: ALL-HANDS EMERGENCY MEETING, Asriel's place, tonight. I'll be there as soon as my mom goes to bed and I can sneak out of the house.

NOELLE: Got it! Will swing Dess over as soon as we can get away without mom noticing. What's the emergency?

DESS: no u will NOT swing me over I keep telling u I dnt want to puke 50 stories off the goddamn ground!!!

KRIS: Take a cab for all I care, just get over there. It's time we did something about my dad. But we're going to have to act fast.

Noelle watched, perched on the arm of the sofa, as everyone crowded around in Asriel's tiny living room. It had been short notice, but they had all been eager to abandon sleep and gather to hear what Kris was planning. There was a hum of excitement in the air, a feeling that maybe, after days of frustratingly fruitless brainstorming, the time might finally have come to put something into motion.

There was also something in the air that only Noelle could feel; she was having a hard time focusing on Kris's words when they spoke, although her gaze rarely strayed from their lips for long.

She shook herself slightly, trying to concentrate. Now was not the time. But maybe later the two of them could sneak away for a while, find another empty rooftop...

"Okay everyone, here's the plan," Kris said. For once they weren't hanging from the ceiling, but standing upright in their costume (minus the mask) to address the others like a mission commander about to lay out a plan of attack. The costume looked good on them, as did the confidence. All they were missing was a whiteboard to draw on. "I call it Operation October Surprise."

"Uh, actually Kris," Berdly said, raising his wing like he was answering a question in class, "it's November 1st."

"I know it's November!" Kris exclaimed. "That's the problem! It's November and the election is the day after tomorrow and we still don't have any proof that my dad is evil!"

"I have a question," Dess said. She was leaning against the wall off to the side of the others, dressed in her Dark Deer catsuit. "Why is bird boy here?"

Berdly gave an indignant squawk. "Excuse you, my lady! I happen to be Spider-Human's most trusted partner and confidant!"

Dess took a threatening step towards him. "I don't care if you're an advisor to the Monster President, call me 'my lady' again and watch what happens."

"Okay, okay, break it up," Kris said, getting between them. "I know he may not look like it, Dess, but Berdly does have his uses." Berdly puffed his feathers, looking caught somewhere between offended and proud. "He's my support guy, runs comms for me on missions. And this is going to be a big mission, so we can use all the support we can get."

"I guess," Dess grumped. "All I'm sayin' is, I don't invite just anyone into the 'Knows Everybody's Secrets' club. Thought this was going to stay a family thing."

"Don't worry, Dess," Noelle said. Berdly was annoying, but she did trust him, when it came down to it. "Kris and I have been friends with Berdly for ages. I know he would never betray our confidence."

"Of course not!" Berdly exclaimed. "I would guard your secrets with my dying breath, fair Noelle! Not even torture would pry them from my lips!"

Noelle smiled patiently at him. "Let's maybe not go that far."

"Can we please focus?" Kris snapped. "This is important."

"Okay, Kris," Asriel said placatingly. "We're all listening."

"Right," Kris said, pacing across the length of the cramped room. "We know my dad's a criminal, we just have to prove it. And we also know where he lives, and him coming to my house for dinner tonight reminded me that in all this time since he and my mom divorced, he's never once invited me or Azzy to visit him there. Big fancy penthouse apartment and he can't even have his kids over for dinner? Why do you think that is?"

"He was probably trying to keep you well away from his criminal dealings," Noelle reasoned.

Kris hit their palm with their fist. "Exactly! There must be stuff there that he didn't want us to see. Shady deals going down or mobsters hanging around or... or business records that would implicate him in something. I don't know. My dad likes to keep up the appearance of being respectable, but he's running a lot of illegal operations from the shadows. There must be *some* form of evidence left behind by all that."

"So you're thinking, what, we break in and steal something incriminating?" Noelle said skeptically. She had some reservations about that plan if that was the case. It seemed a thin hope to hang their hat on.

"I'm down," Dess said, cracking her knuckles. "That'd be ironic, robbing the guy who made me his thief."

But Asriel shook his head. “That won’t work. Stolen evidence isn’t admissible in court, no matter what it proves. There’s a reason the police need search warrants.”

“Damn, look at Lawyer Dreemurr over here,” Dess teased. “That’s your problem, Azzy, you always play by the rules.”

“My - my dad was a cop before he was a crime lord, okay?” Asriel said, flustered. “I learned a thing or two.” He paused and amended, “At least, I think it was before. Golly, that would be pretty messed up if he had been doing illegal stuff even back when he was the police chief.”

Dess chuckled fondly. “You’re so innocent. It’s adorable.”

“The point is,” Kris interrupted, “Azzy’s watched more *Monster Law and Order* than me, so let’s assume he’s right about the stolen evidence thing. Where does that leave us? We could follow Dad, try and get some photos of him meeting with someone sketchy? Or, I don’t know, plant a bug in his office and record him?”

“Also a crime,” Noelle interjected.

“What about filming him without him knowing? Trick him into a confession? That’s not even a misdemeanor, right?”

“That...may not be the worst idea, actually,” Berdly said. When everyone looked at him, he elaborated, “Kris and I use a two-way communicator in their mask so that I can provide them with invaluable tactical information while they are performing their heroic duties! It would be child’s play for me to record the audio they transmit to me. You wouldn’t even have to confront Kingpin directly, merely eavesdrop on a conversation that implicates him in dastardly deeds!”

Asriel nodded thoughtfully. “At most it would require some trespassing. And even if it wasn’t enough on its own to take him down, if we got something juicy enough to leak to the media, it could throw a wrench in his campaign at the last minute. Getting law enforcement to investigate him is going to be a lot harder if he gets elected mayor.”

“The last minute is all we have left,” Noelle said. She had been feeling almost as antsy as Kris all evening, but finally having an actual plan, no matter how vague it might be, was lighting a fire in her. “If we’re going to do this, we should do it now. We can’t afford to wait any longer.”

She looked around the room, searching everyone’s eyes for the same determination she was feeling. Kris was feeling it, she could tell, as was Dess, who nodded resolutely in agreement.

“Wait, Noelle!” Berdly squawked. “If you are going on a covert mission into the belly of the beast, you are going to need the proper equipment for espionage! Allow me!”

He ran to his backpack that he had set down by the door, rummaged through it, and pulled out a folded-up bundle of something rubbery and transparent.

“Oh no,” Noelle said. “Berdly, is that your Stealth Suit?”

“Yes!” Berdly cried, unfurling the bodysuit like a flag. “With the jellyfish skin and the chameleon DNA! You remembered!”

“The one that...didn’t work.”

Berdly gave her an exaggerated wink. “Ah, but that was merely a prototype! I have been hard at work perfecting my design since then and I can assure you that this latest model functions exactly as intended.”

Kris crossed their arms with a smirk. “Nice. Let’s see it, then.”

“Kris, this is a waste of time,” Noelle whispered to them while Berdly clambered into his jellyfish suit. “It’s not going to work.”

“I know, I know, but I want to see this.”

“Behold!” Berdly said, once he’d zipped himself up. He looked like he was wearing a cross between rain gear and a more form-fitting hazmat suit. “One simply needs to press the concealed button on the belt, and...”

Suddenly, he seemed to vanish. Noelle blinked, taken by surprise. On closer inspection, you *could* see where he was standing - there was a slight ripple in the air when he moved, like the shimmer of heat reflecting off of pavement on a summer’s day. But in the dark, if he was standing still, her eyes might easily have passed right over him without noticing anything was amiss.

Kris whistled, impressed. “See, guys, what did I tell you? My boy Berdly’s got some skills.”

“Just remember to be quiet while wearing it!” Berdly yelled, louder than was necessary. “The suit does not refract sound waves, only light!”

“Got it!” Dess shouted back, making everyone wince. “Now shut your beak and get out of that thing. I’m calling dibs on it.” She tried to unzip the back of the suit for Berdly, who was having some trouble reaching around his back with his wings, but recoiled as soon as she touched it. “Ewww, it wobbles! It’s like touching Jell-O!”

“You’re sure you want to wear that thing?” Asriel asked, watching from his seat on the couch with one eyebrow raised skeptically. “Kinda clashes with your sexy outfit.”

Dess choked a little, making Noelle giggle - her sister had always been better at dishing out flirtation than receiving it, and it wasn’t often Asriel managed to catch her off guard.

“Hell yes I’m sure!” Dess sputtered. “Noelle and Kris can crawl on ceilings and stuff, I need an edge for this stealth mission.”

“Alright,” Asriel said, moving to get up. “If we’re doing stealth, then I guess I had better at least change into some darker clothing.”

But before he could stand, Kris suddenly thrust their arms forward and webbed their brother to the back of the couch.

“Kris, what the hell!” Asriel shouted. He squirmed and thrashed, but was stuck tight, his arms pinned to his sides.

Kris added some webbing around his legs to be safe. “Sorry, Azzy, but the girls and I talked about this earlier, and it’s too dangerous for you to come with us.”

“What?!” Asriel protested. “That’s bullshit, Kris! He’s *my* dad, too! We just ate dinner with him, for Angel’s sake, it’s not like he would hurt me.”

“Wouldn’t put it past him,” Dess said darkly. “Sorry, bud, but you gotta face facts. You don’t have a superhero disguise, you don’t have any powers, and you don’t know how to fight. You’d only slow us down.”

“You don’t have powers either! Powers aren’t what makes someone a hero, just - just look at Batmonster!”

“Batmonster’s a comic book character, dude. This is real life, and I’m not letting you risk yours.” She leaned down and kissed his snout. “I want you here when I get back, okay? I’ll make it up to you later.”

Asriel pouted at her. “Do I have a choice?”

“The webbing dissolves in an hour,” Kris called over their shoulder. They were already climbing out the window. “Have fun!”

“Look after him, please, Berdly,” Noelle said, moving to follow Kris and Dess.

“Noelle, one moment!” Berdly said. She paused and turned back to see him holding something out to her. “Take this. It’s a duplicate of the microphone I use to talk to Kris - I mean, to Spider-Human. Just tuck it into the collar of your costume, and put the bluetooth earpiece in your ear, and I’ll be able to run comms for both of you. I also have a pair for December.”

Noelle took the earpiece and microphone, installing them like he’d said before slipping her mask on. “Thanks, Berdly.”

“Do not mention it! Oh, and Spider-Doe?”

She couldn’t help but smile at his use of her code name. “Yes?”

“Good luck.”

Noelle nodded, then leapt out the window. As she left, she overheard Berdly blathering to Asriel, “Looks like you get to assist me in being the man in the chair tonight, Asriel! Or should I say the man on the sofa? Ooooh, this is so exciting!”

She swung down to the nearby rooftop where Kris and Dess were waiting for her.

Dess was zipping herself up into the gelatinous stealth suit. "How's Azzy coping?" she asked.

"Berdly is already squawking his ear off. Talk about a captive audience!" She winced sympathetically. "He's going to be mad about this for a while, isn't he?"

"Nah, it's fine," Dess said. "He actually loves being tied up."

Kris clasped their hands over their ears. "Ew, Dess, stop talking!"

Dess smirked. "Hey, Noelle, I was meaning to ask, do you think Azzy and I could borrow one of those web-shooters some time?"

"No! I'm just going to pretend I didn't hear any of that," Noelle said quickly, blushing under her mask.

Although now that you mention it, she thought, glancing at Kris, it would be an interesting test of our respective webbing's strength to see which of us could break free of the other's webs the fastest. Kris's organic webbing is pretty strong...

"Killjoy," Dess muttered, bringing Noelle's train of thought to a merciful halt. She pulled the stealth suit up over her head and hit the button on her waist, melting into the shadows. "Going stealth mode. God I've always wanted to say that. Is it working?"

"Yup," Kris confirmed. "Can't see you at all."

"Awesome. I'll be right behind you two, so don't worry, you get in any trouble, I'll be there to get you out."

Kris turned to Noelle. "Noelle, if I'm right about my dad..." They swallowed roughly and took a deep breath before continuing, "I just need to know...are you ready for this?"

Noelle looked out across the city. She had always loved the sight of the skyline at night, all the high-rise windows lit up in an irregular patchwork quilt of little yellow squares. NHC had always felt like it was part of her, since long before she ever swung above its concrete canyons and leapt across its rooftops. This was the city that her mother was in charge of, where she had lived her whole life; it was her home.

She did not want to see her home fall into the hands of a man as dangerous and duplicitous as Asgore Dreemurr. She worried that if it did, it would become something unrecognizable. It wasn't just the fate of her family or Kris's that was at stake tonight. It was *every* family that called this city home.

"Let's do it," she said with a decisive nod. "I may not have been doing this as long as you, Kris, but I know I can make a difference - we can make things right, together. We have to try. So yeah, I'm ready." She looked at her best friend - or were they something else now? - wishing she could see their eyes through their mask. At least, even with both of them masked, they were being honest with each other now. "Are you?"

Kris looked away for a long moment, out at the city, and then said, "I guess there's only one way to find out." They turned to Noelle and took a step closer, pulling their mask up over the bottom half of their face. "Kiss for good luck?"

Noelle smiled, pulling up her own mask in turn, and leaned down to give them a kiss.

"UM HELLO??" Dess's voice said loudly from somewhere to Noelle's left. "What the @#*k are you doing?"

Noelle almost yelped. With Dess invisible, she had forgotten her sister was still there. "Dess! Um, well, we were just, uh...kissing?"

She really didn't know why she phrased that as a question, but Kris nodded anyway to confirm it. "Yup."

"Why would you kiss Kris?" Dess's disembodied voice demanded.

"Rude," Kris said. "You're lucky I can't tell where you are right now."

"Dess can you like, turn visible again or something? This is really disconcerting..."

"No! Answer the question!"

"Okay fine!" Noelle huffed. "I was kissing Kris because we're dating now!" She looked at Kris and added, "Wait, we *are* dating now, right?"

Kris nodded again. "We're totally dating now."

"YOU TWO ARE DATING NOW?!" Berdly's voice burst onto the intercom in Noelle's ear so loudly that it made her cringe. "Why didn't you say anything??"

"We weren't ready to break the news yet..." Noelle answered in a small voice.

"Hey Asriel did you hear that??" Berdly's voice shouted, slightly quieter in the background. "Kris and Noelle are dating now!" He returned to full volume to say, "Asriel says that's great and he's happy for you, and also that you guys are assholes."

Noelle sighed. "Tell him I said thanks, I guess."

"I can't believe you're dating Kris," Dess said. Now that she had gotten over the shock she didn't sound angry or anything; it was more a mix of excitement and disbelief. "Noelle, you are going to have to tell me *everything* later. When did this even happen? How??"

"It kind of just did?"

"You got my brother," Kris deadpanned. "Only fair I get Noelle."

"I - Azzy and I aren't dating!" Dess sputtered.

Kris facepalmed against their mask. “Just ask him to be your boyfriend already. You guys are the older ones, it's honestly embarrassing that Noelle and I got there first.”

“M-maybe I will!” Dess pouted. Noelle could almost see the invisible shimmer-Dess crossing her arms defensively. “When I’m good and ready.”

“Can we please get back to breaking into Kris's dad’s house?” Noelle whined. “I need to punch someone.”

Kris laughed. “It’s a stealth mission, Noelle, if we're good at it we won't have to punch anyone. But come on then, the action’s this way.”

They sprinted to the rooftop’s edge and leapt off, shouting over their shoulder as they swung away, “Hey Dess, try and keep up!”

“Really, Noelle?” Dess grumbled. “That kid is the one? Why? Why would you do this to me?”

Noelle smiled fondly, her heart warm despite the chill of the night and the danger of what they were about to do. “I don't know what to tell you, Dess. They're my hero.”

“Vomit,” Dess said. “Never forgiving you for this.”

Noelle giggled. “Come on, we’re going to get left behind.”

She jumped into the air and swung away after Kris, following both her responsibility and her heart into the unknown destiny awaiting her.

Chapter 13: Infiltrations and Revelations

The nighttime shadows lay heavy on Kingpin's penthouse as they made their approach. His rooftop suite towered high above the surrounding buildings, an imposing, modern-day summit reaching its fingers towards the heavens. It was as much of a status symbol as the aging mansion where Noelle's family lived, only sending a very different message. Holiday Manor had the clout of old money and high society. Asgore's home implied the modern, self-made success of dirty money and ruthless ambition.

It was also a hell of a climb, even for someone who could scale flat surfaces with nothing but her own hands and hooves. Noelle slowly followed Kris up, taking a zig-zagging pattern to avoid lit windows, while Dess clung tightly to her, her arms wrapped around Noelle's shoulders. Kris had securely tethered the sisters together with a band of webbing around their waists, but even so, Dess held on like her life depended on it, face buried in the crook of Noelle's neck, her eyes shut.

"Not so tight!" Noelle complained. "You're going to choke me if you're not careful."

"Sorry, sorry!" Dess said, easing her grip around Noelle's neck. "I just, uh, I don't do well with heights."

"That didn't seem to stop you from swinging around the city as Dark Deer."

"Yeah, well, I never went *this* high up. I can leap across rooftops and shit, I'm not a coward, but this is suicidal." In the reflection of the window in front of her, Noelle saw Dess glance over her shoulder at the city far below and immediately regret it, a queasy look on her face.

"Don't worry, the webbing will hold, and I'm not going to fall. But uh, if you have to puke, just don't do it on my costume, please?"

Dess groaned, shutting her eyes again. "I'll try my best."

Berdly's voice came through Noelle's earpiece with a staticky squawk. "Don't stop now, Noelle! I've been tracking your position via the GPS signal in Kris's spider-tracers, and you're almost to the top!"

"Roger that, Berdly."

A minute later, once they were nearly there, Kris called down to them in a whisper. "Stay hidden down here for a moment when we get to the top. I'm going to scout ahead."

Noelle nodded. She watched as Kris poked their head over the edge of the rooftop, then vaulted up onto the roof. A minute later, they came back into view and waved her up. "All clear!"

Noelle hauled herself onto the roof, rather less gracefully than Kris had done, considering the extra weight on her back. Once she had righted herself, standing back to back with Dess, she began to rip them free of the webbing that bound them together. Someone without super strength would doubtless have had a harder time tearing through Kris's strange organic webs, but Noelle could just about manage it, even if the strands did stick to her fingers. She shook them loose by violently flapping her hands, ignoring Kris's giggles.

"Alright, here we are," Noelle said after extricating herself from Dess. "Now what?"

She looked around the rooftop: There was a large greenhouse taking up most of one end, and a swimming pool closer to the penthouse that was covered with a tarp. The rest of the roof was open space, a big patio with a stunning view of the city below. The apartment itself was built into the building's top floor, but with an outcropping of sleek glass windows, like the side of a modern house looking out over the roof and the view beyond it. Through the windows, Noelle could see a spiral staircase, a well-stocked minibar, and a tastefully arranged array of expensive sofas and coffee tables underneath artsy hanging light fixtures that looked like constellations, each bulb a star.

Those lights were dimmed, however, and there was no sign of anyone home. "I don't see anyone," she pointed out to Kris. "Which means he either didn't go straight home after dinner at your house, or he's already gone to bed."

Kris shook their head. "Dad was always a night owl. I'm guessing he's spending the night out taking care of business. Whatever that means for him."

"Lucky for us, I guess," Dess said. "Although...it's odd, I would have expected at least someone keeping watch. When I was here before, he always had some goons with guns acting like his personal bodyguards."

"Maybe he already sent them home for the night," Noelle speculated, wandering over to the greenhouse to peer through its fogged-up windows. "It's not like he needs much security in a place like this. For most people there's only one way in or out, and it's not climbing up the side of the building."

"Damn," Dess said, looking down at her rubbery bodysuit. "Don't tell me I brought along this dumb gizmo of Berdly's for nothing."

"If there was anyone here, our spider-senses would have warned us," Kris pointed out. "Which means we're in the clear. All we have to do is get inside without triggering any burglar alarms."

Dess cracked her knuckles. "Leave that to me. Asgore taught me how to break into places like this so I could steal stuff for him. Not the smartest move on his part in retrospect, huh?"

She strode forward to examine the entrance. "You're right, this door is connected to an alarm system. I could pick the lock, but it'd send out an alert right away. Buuuut..." She stepped back, tracing a line from the door along the floor with her finger, walking around the perimeter of the apartment's exterior wall. "The

alarm needs to be connected to a power source somewhere, and it's gotta be somewhere accessible in case a fuse needs replacing or whatever, which means I'm guessing the power junction will be somewhere around...there!" She pointed at a nondescript gray panel on the wall around the corner of the building and hurried over. "Locked, of course. Can't have just any unauthorized person messing with the power."

"What are we going to do, then?" Noelle fretted. She hadn't crawled up a whole skyscraper just to be stopped by a locked door. "We have to get in there somehow!"

"We have super strength, Noelle," Kris said, stepping forward. "I'll just rip the panel off."

Dess blocked them with an arm in front of their chest. "Hold up. For all you know that could set off another alarm. Fortunately, you don't have to rely on brute force when I'm around. Just watch and learn, spider-nerds."

She unzipped the front of the stealth suit just enough to reach a hand inside and retrieve a hidden lockpick from a pouch along her belt. Then she set to work, fiddling with the lock on the electrical panel. "Just gotta get these tumblers lined up..."

While Dess flexed her thieving muscles, Noelle took the opportunity to quickly touch base with Kris. "So once we get in, what are we looking for?"

"Financial records, personal correspondence, anything incriminating. Maybe something on his computer, if I can crack the password. Even if it's not enough to get him arrested, like Asriel said, priority one right now is stopping his campaign. If we can find proof and leak it to the Bugle, then who knows?" They shrugged. "It might not be enough, but anything that hurts him in the election is worth trying at this point."

"And if we can't find anything, we leave a bug as a back-up plan and hope it records something we can use?"

Berdly's voice cut in: "I will be standing at the ready to record anything you happen to overhear, as well. Audio from files on his computer, perhaps."

"I'm hoping for something we can act on tonight," Kris said. "And also..." They glanced away. "I want to look for anything to do with Rudy. Maybe...maybe a letter, or something Da- I mean, Kingpin might have kept."

"Kris," Noelle said softly, lowering her voice on instinct even though there was no one around to hear, "do you really think Asgore could have -"

"I don't know what to think anymore. But we should try and find out how much Rudy knew. Maybe what happened to him really was random, but the odds of that go way down if Kingpin had a motive."

Noelle swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded. There was so much she wanted to say to Kris; it was clear they were torn up inside about their dad, and they were walking into this knowing full well that the unpleasant knowledge they

already had could still get worse. But with Berdly listening in and a mission to focus on, this didn't seem like the time to comfort them.

"Got it!" Dess called. A moment later, she flipped a few switches in the fusebox, and the dim lights inside the building went out. It was suddenly much darker on the rooftop without the ambient lighting, and Noelle inched closer to Kris, instinctively wanting to stick together as the shadows encroached.

Then the lights came back on again. "That should have disabled the alarms until someone resets them," Dess said. She turned her lockpicking skills on the penthouse door, and a moment later it swung open. "After you."

Kris and Noelle walked inside. The opulence of the place was a little overwhelming. Even Noelle, who had grown up around wealth, felt uncomfortable in the big, airy room - though possibly that had more to do with the trespassing than anything.

"Gosh, he even has a piano like ours," she pointed out to Dess, stepping lightly over to examine the bulky instrument. "Dess?" She looked back over her shoulder, but didn't see her sister anywhere. "Where'd you go?"

"I'm still here," Dess said from a few feet to her left, making Noelle jump.

"Aaa! Why'd you go invisible?!"

"I dunno," Dess's disembodied voice whispered. "I guess I feel safer when I can't be seen."

"You know what, I think you just really wanted to play with your new toy," Noelle laughed.

"So sue me. Wouldn't be fair if you two dorks were the only ones with cool powers."

If Noelle squinted, she could see the shimmer in the air as Dess reached out to touch the piano. Her invisible fingers left streaks along the dusty cover over the keys. "Doesn't look like anyone's used this thing in a while."

"He always liked piano music," Kris said quietly, coming up behind them. "Even made me take lessons when I was younger, even though we didn't own one."

"I remember," Noelle said. "You would come over to use mine. All those late afternoon concerts after school..." If she closed her eyes, she could almost hear the notes, the mental image of Kris hunched over the keys in concentration still lingering clearly in her mind's eye.

"Let's not get distracted," Kris muttered. "A piano isn't evidence of anything."

They wandered over to investigate another room off to the side, Noelle and (presumably) Dess following.

"This must be his office," Noelle said, following Kris through the door. There was an oak desk with a PC on it, and bookshelves and filing cabinets lining the

walls. It looked just like her mother's office back at home, the one she worked out of when she wasn't at City Hall.

"Yup. If there's anything useful in this place, it'll be here." Kris held their fingers to the side of their mask, then added, "Berdly says he may be able to help me get access to the computer. You two look around, see what else you can find. Just be careful to put things back exactly where you found them."

Dess started going through the drawers in Asgore's desk, while Noelle turned her attention to the bookshelves. There was a lot of nonfiction: several large volumes on monster history and politics, some books on horticulture, even a few true crime books about the rise and fall of monster crime gangs of the past. Those were a bit on the nose, Noelle thought, but then, being the former police chief did give him an excuse for such interests.

Something on one of the shelves caught her eye: Not a book at all, but a row of thick binders. She took one off the shelf and opened it, and was surprised to see a young Kris's round, childish face staring back at her. It was a photo of them as a kid, wearing those red plastic horns they used to wear everywhere, a big goofy grin on their face.

"Hey, check this out," Noelle said, turning to Kris, who was hunched over their father's computer, trying to get past the log-in screen.

Kris glanced over their shoulder. "Find something?"

"Just some old family photo albums. There are pictures of you and Azzy in here." She giggled, turning the pages. "Man, you've really grown up a lot. I forgot what a cute kid you were."

A shadow passed over Kris's face as they looked at the image of their younger self. They turned back to the computer. "Noelle, focus. This isn't the time for a trip down memory lane. Not unless there's something in there that might be a computer password." They bumped their fist against the desk in frustration. "God, you wouldn't think it would be so hard to guess my own dad's password."

"Have you tried '1234'?" Dess offered.

"Dess, we wouldn't be here right now if my dad was a moron."

"No no, that's why it's the perfect password! No one would ever expect a smart person to have a password like that! Just try it."

"Fine, whatever, I'm trying it," Kris said. "And, shockingly, that did not work. Any more bright ideas?"

"Dang," Dess said. "I'm all out."

Kris swore under their breath, but Noelle was already tuning them out, her attention focused on the photo album. She knew she was letting herself get distracted, but there were pictures of her and her own family in here too, and every page contained memories; memories of a happier time when both the

Dreemurr and Holiday families had been whole, unblemished by death or deception.

On one page was her and Kris, playing together as children; she had forgotten all about that particular day, but the image brought back a flood of memories. On the next, Dess and Asriel as middle schoolers, always inseparable back then, posing for a photo at a birthday party.

Noelle had to hold back tears when she turned the page again and saw a familiar face looking back at her. Her father was smiling in the photograph, a beer in one hand and the other looped around the broad shoulders of Asgore Dreemurr. They were at a bar, Asgore wearing his police uniform, and from the badge pinned to his chest and the loose timeline of the album, Noelle could deduce when the photo had been taken: On the day of Asgore's promotion. They were celebrating him becoming the chief of police.

Noelle slipped the photo out from under its protective plastic sheet and took it over to a lamp standing in the corner of the office. She wanted to take a closer look, to hold it up to the light and examine every detail of the two men's expressions, searching that happy moment in time for any hint of discord, any trace of a sign their happiness might one day end in ruin.

But there were no easy answers to be found. Rudy looked perfectly at ease, a twinkle in his eye. Asgore was all smiles, proud and boisterous, not a hint of darkness in him. They clung to each other drunkenly, supporting each other's weight, beer mugs in their hands. This was her and Kris's fathers as she remembered them: Happy, innocent, alive.

Noelle sighed and raised her mask to wipe a tear from her eye. As she did so, the photo slipped from between her fingers and fell to the floor.

She knelt to pick it up off the carpet, but paused when she saw the photo. It had fallen face-down, and now she noticed a detail she hadn't seen before: Handwriting on the back.

Noelle snatched it up to read it, but it wasn't much of a note. It was actually just a string of numbers, none of which meant anything to her. But clearly, it had meant something to Asgore.

She decided to show it to Kris. "Hey, Kris, do you know what this means?"

Kris looked at it for a moment, then said, "Yeah, I do. It was Dad's badge number, back when we were kids and he was just a cop. I remember because he let me hold the badge sometimes. I liked it because it was so shiny - he always kept it polished. He was really proud of what he did. He used to say that protecting and serving monsterkind was the most important work a person could do. Ironical to think he ended up mostly just serving himself." They turned to look at the computer with its vexing log-in screen. "You don't suppose..."

"Worth a shot," Noelle said. She watched as Kris punched in the badge number and hit Enter.

Nothing happened.

“Incorrect password! Again!” Kris seethed. “I'm gonna murder this computer!”

“There's gotta be a reason he wrote this down. So if it's not the computer passcode, then what...”

“Hey, over here,” came Dess’s voice from the bookshelf. “I found something.”

Noelle turned back to see the remaining photo albums being removed from the shelves. It was a somewhat eerie effect with Dess still cloaked in her invisibility suit, like the albums were floating through the air by themselves. But once she tore her gaze away from that strange sight, Noelle's attention was caught by what the gap on the shelf had revealed: a wall safe. Part of the back of the bookcase had been cut away to allow access to it, but the shelf’s contents had hidden it from view.

“What the hell?” Kris said, getting up to examine it. “Why not just put it behind a painting or something cliché like that?”

“Because it's an *extra secret* safe!” Dess said. “Hmm. Old steel thing, too. This didn't come with the penthouse; it was brought here from somewhere else and installed in the wall.”

“Wait, I know this safe,” Kris said. “My parents used to keep this under their bed. I only saw it a couple times because, you know, they didn't like me snooping around in their room, but I remember trying to find my Christmas presents one year and finding this instead. I just assumed it was where my dad kept his gun when he wasn't working.”

“Must have been more than that,” Dess reasoned, “or he wouldn't have taken it with him after the divorce. It needs a combination, though. Good news is it's not high-tech enough to be rigged with any alarms. Bad news is even I can't crack that thing. At least not without it taking all night and/or some explosives.”

“That won't be necessary, Dess,” Noelle said, holding up the photograph. “Because we have the combination right here.”

The others stepped aside, and she put in Asgore's old badge number, one digit at a time. With a click, the safe door swung open.

Noelle didn't know what she had been expecting. Money, probably, and maybe weapons, too. Instead, she found a pile of letters, aging sheets of stationary with curled edges. She carefully gathered up the whole stack and transferred them to the desk.

She gave a little gasp as she looked over the first letter in the pile, Kris and Dess reading over her shoulder. “That’s Dad’s handwriting!”

“And look at the date in the corner,” Kris said. “That's ages ago, before any of us were even born. Back when our parents were in college...”

Noelle scanned the page and put her hand over her mouth. “Oh,” she breathed quietly. “These are kind of, um... intimate.”

Kris read over her shoulder. “*Dearest Asgore, my golden knight, my gentle giant. I will never forget the bliss I felt in your arms last night, or the beauty of the morning sun against your golden hair as you slept.* Oh, shit. These are...”

“THESE ARE LOVE LETTERS,” Dess blurted out. “Noelle, did you know about this?!”

“No!” Noelle shook her head. “I just knew they were old friends...”

“Sounds like they were something more than that,” Kris said. “Not exactly a crime, though. I mean, the only people who are going to care about this are our families.”

“Yeah, um, I don't feel great about reading these...” Noelle said. Maybe it was just a fling, something the two of them had moved on from once they had gotten married. Or maybe it had been something else, and lasted longer. She wasn't sure she wanted to know either way. Her father was dead, and what she wanted was closure, and if necessary, justice. Unearthing old, buried secrets that might only cause harm to his memory wasn't how she wanted to honor him.

“So then let's skip ahead,” Dess said, pulling some later letters out of the bottom of the stack. “The ones at the bottom look like newer paper.”

She paused for a moment to read, the letter appearing to float in mid-air. “Oh, \$&!*#.”

“What?” Noelle asked. “What does it say?”

“It's dated five days before Dad died.” Dess cleared her throat, her voice suddenly thick, and began to read aloud:

Asgore,

I know you deserve to hear this from me in person, but I can't bring myself to say it to your face. I guess that makes me a coward, but I won't mince words any longer: This person you've become scares me. The things you've gotten involved in, the people you're associating with...this isn't you, Asgore. It's wrong.

All my adult life, I've trusted you. I've stood by you, even when we disagreed. I've kept your secrets faithfully and watched my children grow up alongside yours. I haven't always approved of your views, but I thought you knew the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil. That you would always uphold the law and protect and serve the people, like you swore to do.

But you've changed. Or maybe this darkness was always in you and I just didn't want to see it. Ever since you quit the force, though...it's

like you're a different person. Like the Asgore who used to mean so much to me, the Asgore I called friend for so long, was just a mask.

I know what you've been doing, what you've been smuggling through the warehouses at Flower King. I have a wife who works in government, and you're not my only old friend left with ties to NHPD. And I swear to you, Asgore, if you don't put a stop to this madness, I will.

Please understand, I do not want to be in this position. This is not blackmail. This is an intervention. I say this as someone who loves you: You need help. I'm not going to sit back and let you throw away your honor on this horrific, self-serving crusade. The kind of power you're seeking isn't worth it, not at the cost of your SOUL.

You have a week to turn yourself in before I go to the police and tell them everything I know. I pray you'll do the right thing.

Because if you don't, then I will. No matter the cost.

With love, despite everything,

Rudolph

“He knew...” Noelle breathed. She felt suddenly dizzy; her knees buckled, and she had to lean on the desk just to stay upright. “He threatened Asgore, and then...right after that...oh god.” She pulled her mask up over her mouth and nose, breathing hard, her voice a small, shaky whisper. “It wasn't a coincidence, was it?”

Dess slammed an invisible hand on the table. “I'm gonna #&\$ing kill him if he really -”

“There's more,” Kris interrupted. Their voice was solemn, yet oddly emotionless as they reached for the next letter, like they were already steeling themselves for what it might prove.

This letter, Noelle noticed, was different from the others. The handwriting on it was not her father's, and it was blotted and smeared in circular stains. The word came to her as though from a distance, itself blurred by grief: teardrops.

Kris took a deep breath. “It's in my dad's handwriting this time. Dated... shortly after Rudy died.”

They began to read:

It's done. I rewarded my assassin handsomely, of course - no price could be higher than what I've already paid. When I committed

myself to my grand goal, I knew that the journey would require sacrifice, but I never imagined...

I keep thinking about Carol and the girls. Not sure I'll ever be able to face them again after this. Maybe it's best if I never do. My mistake was being complacent. Allowing him the chance to see my true self. He accused me of wearing a mask, but in truth, the mask was bound to slip sooner or later. I never could hide much from Rudy. I just wish he had understood, in the end, instead of forcing my hand. If only he had talked to me! That stupid, stubborn, beautiful fool.

I shouldn't be writing this down. Shouldn't be writing anything in this state. But this is the next best thing to a eulogy that he'll ever get from me, and may the Angel scour my SOUL, he deserves at least that much.

Rest in peace, Rudy Holiday. If I could do it over again, I would have turned you down that night in my youth, pushed you away and kept you safe from me. And failing that, if we somehow still ended up where we did, then I would have done you the courtesy of pulling the trigger myself. Wherever your SOUL now resides, I hope you can forgive my cowardice.

I swear I'll make a better world for your children, my friend. Even if it's a worse one without you in it.

For a long moment after Kris's choked-up voice trailed off, no one spoke, not even Dess. They were all too horrified for words. Noelle felt like her throat was too tight to even attempt speech, her heartbeat thudding in her ears.

A man she had known since she was a fawn, a man her family had trusted, had ordered her father killed. Rudy had loved Asgore since before she was even born, and all that love had gotten him was the betrayal of a bullet. It was a thought too horrible to comprehend, too painful to bear.

So deep in their horror and grief were they that none of them heard the door opening elsewhere in the building, or registered the sound of heavy footsteps coming their way in time to hide. Noelle didn't even feel the tingle of her spider-sense until it was too late.

By the time Noelle did startle out of her shock and bolt upright, pulling down her mask, it was only because she had noticed the enormous horned figure suddenly filling the doorway to his office.

If Asgore was surprised to see them, he did not let it show for more than a moment. His gaze immediately took in the scene, before his expression grew firm and frightening. "I always knew I should have burned those," he said in a deep rumble, "but every time I tried, something always stayed my hand. Guilt is a force as strong as any SOUL."

“You're a murderer,” Noelle said, stepping forward and glaring at him under her mask, her hands balled into fists even as her whole body trembled. “You killed Rudolph Holiday.”

“You so-called superheroes,” Kingpin scoffed. “For all your vaunted strength, you have no idea what real power is, or what it costs. I suppose I'll have to teach you. I can't exactly let you leave with those letters.”

“You can't stop us,” Kris growled from under their mask, their voice muffled by anger and hatred.

“If only that were true.” With a heavy sigh, Asgore removed his suit jacket and tossed it aside. “I'm afraid, my self-righteous, meddling young troublemakers, that only one question remains now that you know the truth.” He loosened his tie, undid his cufflinks and rolled up the clean white sleeves of his suit. “Namely, which of you two am I going to have to kill first?”

Chapter 14: The Flower King

Spider-Doe and Spider-Human braced themselves as they squared off with Asgore Dreemurr, the Kingpin of Crime. In unison, they shifted their slender, superpowered bodies into a crouch, ready to leap away at a split-second's notice as Kingpin raised his hulking fists and prepared to charge at them.

But before anyone could make a move, the first blow was struck by an unexpected, unseen combatant. Asgore's head snapped to one side, the shape of his mouth and cheek distorted by an invisible fist to the jaw.

"Stay the \$#&% away from them!" Dess shouted.

Asgore was clearly taken aback by the sucker punch, but even with the element of surprise, the blow barely staggered him. Instead of falling, he just shook it off. "Who the hell?"

Another punch hit him in the gut. "You bastard!" Dess screamed. Every word was punctuated by a disorienting flurry of quick blows to Asgore's massive torso. "You! Murdered! Him! I'm going! To! Kill you!"

Asgore stood as immovable as an oak tree, weathering the storm of punches. Then he raised his left arm and swept it forcefully through the air directly in front of him. His blind retaliation connected in a vicious backhand, and Noelle saw a blur flash through the air as Dess's invisible body went flying, colliding with a table in the corner and knocking a lamp onto the floor.

"I know that voice," Asgore rumbled. "Found yourself some new allies, have you? But why can't I see you, December?"

"Maybe 'cause you've got something in your eyes!" Kris shouted, shooting a blast of webbing onto Asgore's face like a blindfold. The crime lord stumbled backward in surprise, trying to pull the sticky substance from his eyes with one giant hand. "Spider-Doe, take him!"

Noelle didn't have to be asked twice. With a shout of fury, she hurled herself at Kingpin. She went low while Kris went high; Spider-Human leapt upwards, drawing their fist back for a punch to the face just as Noelle slammed into Asgore's legs, trying to knock him off balance.

Asgore staggered as Kris's punch, much stronger than what Dess could muster, hit him in the jaw. He tried to stumble backwards, but Noelle held his legs fast. He teetered, losing his equilibrium, and then fell onto his back with a tremendous crash.

Noelle didn't have long to press her advantage. Asgore violently kicked her away, the toe of his shoe catching her jaw. Pain erupted through her face and she fell backwards onto the floor herself, still conscious but stunned. She winced at the clicking sound her jaw made as she painfully pushed it back in place.

Kris didn't notice. They were on top of the fallen Asgore, raining punch after punch down on his face.

"Noelle!" Dess's voice hissed in her ear. She felt hands on her arm and back, helping her sit up. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good," she said with a grimace, although it hurt just to speak. She looked at Kris whaling on their father, and her eyes widened. "Duck!" she yelled, pulling Dess down.

Because just at that moment, Asgore had reached his big paws up, grabbed Kris by the head, and flung them away. Kris flipped in mid-air as they flew over Dess and Noelle's heads, but they managed to right themselves in time to land feet-first against the wall above the bookshelves, sticking to the surface.

"Enough!" Asgore roared, clambering to his feet. He ripped the webbing from his eyes, taking clumps of white fur with it.

"It'll be *enough* when you can't hurt anyone ever again!" Dess shouted, springing up to fight him.

But her cry had given away her position, and Asgore seized her with a sweep of his hand. "There you are! This invisibility trick you're doing...how does it - Ah. I can feel it now." With his other hand, he reached up and tore the stealth suit down the front, revealing Dess's torso and snarling face. "Very clever, but I can see you now, December. That's good. I want to see your face when I crush you, you little pest."

"Drop her right now!" Kris yelled, pushing off the wall to throw themselves at their father.

But with his free hand, Asgore caught them in midair and slammed them down against the desk so hard that it cracked. "Stay down, little superhero. I'll deal with you next."

"Leave them alone!" Noelle screamed. She lunged for him as well, and Asgore responded by flinging Dess at her with a casual flick of his wrist. Before Noelle could react in time to catch her, Dess collided with her. The rubbery stealth suit softened the blow, but left the two of them in a tangle of limbs on the floor.

Her intervention gave Kris a few precious seconds to catch their breath after having the wind knocked out of them, however. They sprung back up to their feet and leapt forward, not at Asgore but over his head, flying between his horns and through the office door. "You want me, Kingpin? Let's take this outside!"

It was an obvious diversionary tactic, but it worked to keep Asgore's attention off of the others while Noelle and Dess got to their hooves. "Are you okay?" Noelle asked.

"I will be once I beat that bastard senseless," Dess growled. She tried to climb out of her torn bodysuit, but was getting tangled in it. "Help me out of this useless thing!"

Noelle saved her some time and ripped the rest of it off her body, just as Kingpin had done. *Sorry, Berdly. I'll help you make a new one.*

Wait. That reminded her. While Dess ran straight back into the fray to help Kris, Noelle put her fingers to the communicator tucked away in the fold of her ear. "Berdly, do you copy? Are you still there?"

"I read you, Noelle!" his voice chirped in her ear. "I've been listening in and, uh, trying to keep Kris's brother calm. Wait, Asriel, stop! Kris told you to stay here, you can't just -" Noelle heard a sound in the background like a door slamming. "Nevermind, he just left. I couldn't stop him once that web fluid dissolved. I'm sorry, Noelle."

"Never mind Asriel right now," she said. "Kingpin's tougher than we thought."

"I can't see what's going on, but I could hear the fighting. What's happening over there?"

She looked out at the living room, where Kris was dancing circles around Kingpin now that they had more room to maneuver, swinging from the hanging light fixtures and leaping right over his head, distracting him and trying to restrain him with webbing while Dess went toe to toe with him up close. "We're holding our own, but we're taking a beating here, and we still don't have a proper confession. We could retreat and cut our losses, but without more hard proof than a couple of stolen letters, we'll never be able to take him down for good. But if we stay here and keep fighting, someone might get killed. I don't know what to do."

"You have to get him to confess, Noelle. Whatever it takes, get him talking instead of fighting. Get him to say in plain English that he killed your father, and then get the hell out of there."

"Got it," Noelle said. "I'll do my best. Please, stay on the line and keep recording everything my mic picks up."

She looked up to see Asgore hurl Kris across the room and straight into Dess, knocking her over like a bowling pin. He then hefted the entire grand piano from the corner over his head, preparing to throw it at them.

"Oh crap!" Noelle shouted, instantly breaking out into a sprint. Kingpin was rearing back, straining with the exertion, about to throw the heavy piano and crush Kris and Dess like insects.

Even as she rushed forward, she knew wasn't going to be fast enough to swing them out of the way in time.

So instead, she jumped directly between them and the piano arcing through the air, planted her hooves, and thrust her hands out, palms splayed, to catch it as it fell. She was not going to watch Dess and Kris die. She was *not* going to let Kingpin take even more loved ones from her; not without holding on with everything she had. And if she was about to die, then at least she would die in defense of the people she cared for most in all the world.

The piano hit her, and Noelle. Held. On.

It felt like her arms would be torn from their sockets any second now. She screamed as the immense weight bore down on her. She had broken the object's fall, but she might yet be crushed beneath it. Strong as she was, she had never fully tested the limits of that strength, never attempted to lift anything so heavy.

Noelle dropped to one knee, her legs buckling underneath her. She gritted her teeth, sweat matting the fur of her back and staining her costume. Agony lanced through her arms, her strength failing her. Any second now...

She squeezed her eyes shut and braced herself for one final moment of pain.

And then, against all expectations, the weight grew less heavy. Noelle blinked her eyes back open to see Kris kneeling beside her, palms against the piano just like hers, helping her hold it up. "Hnngh...Kris..."

"Shh, it's okay. I've got you. Count of 3, then push with all you've got, okay? 1...2...3!"

Noelle pushed, expecting fire in her arms, expecting to black out from the strain. But with Kris's strength joined in concert with her own, the impossible became easier. The piano flew away from them, back across the room. Asgore ducked out of its path just in time. It smashed right through the glass wall, sending glittering shards everywhere, a tremendous shattering noise cracking the air.

It didn't stop there, either. The instrument flew out onto the rooftop and all the way across to the greenhouse at the far end, where it crashed through the glass, punching a hole in the structure, and finally came to rest with a resounding boom.

"No!" Asgore shouted, abandoning the beleaguered heroes to run out onto the roof, glass shards cracking under his shoes. He assessed the damage with his hair clenched in his hands. "My flowers! They'll die if they're exposed to these temperatures! I'll kill you for that, do you hear me?"

Noelle didn't have the strength left to face his wrath. She was winded and exhausted, every muscle in her arms feeling like jelly. She had to lean on Kris, letting them support her as she slowly staggered to her hooves.

But while they recovered and Asgore frantically tried to dig priceless plant life out of the wreckage, December slipped noiselessly through the hole in the wall and out onto the roof, stopping only to pick up a long, sharp shard of glass from the floor.

"Dess, wait..." Noelle said weakly. She stumbled forward, her legs feeling tired and slow. "Don't..."

Dess clenched the shard of glass like a knife in her hand, oblivious to its jagged edges. Asgore had his back turned, paying her no mind. Like he wasn't even worried. Like she was no threat to him at all.

And Noelle could tell that this made Dess furious. Her sister picked up speed as she approached the ruined greenhouse, breaking into a run while Noelle and Kris chased after her.

Dess raised the glass knife above her head, charging towards Asgore with a strangled yell of hatred.

“Dess, no!” *I can't let her kill him. I want to make him pay too, but not like this.*

Noelle raised a trembling arm and pressed her fingers to her palm. Shaky as she was, it was a miracle that she didn't miss, but her aim was true. Just as Dess was about to strike, Noelle's webbing caught her makeshift weapon and yanked it from her grasp.

“No!” Dess shouted, hissing and clutching her hand to her chest as the glass cut her palm.

It was at that moment that Asgore finally deigned to turn around. He took in what had almost happened quickly, and reacted even faster. Before Dess could get out of the way, he seized her by the neck and hoisted her off the ground. “You...” he snarled. “I don't care anymore that you're Rudy's daughter, December. You never appreciated everything your father sacrificed for you. Ever since you were a child, you've been nothing but a spoiled brat. He loved you, and all you ever did was cause trouble for him.” He squeezed her neck while she struggled and clawed at his arms. “You're a disgrace to his memory.”

“Dad, stop!”

Asgore didn't loosen his grip on Dess, but he did turn away from her, his bloodthirsty focus grinding to a halt. Even Noelle stopped running, looking over in shocked surprise as Kris pulled their Spider-Human mask from their head, revealing their mop of messy brown hair and watery, bloodshot red eyes.

“Kris?” Asgore's voice sounded stunned. “Angel above...it can't be.” He turned to Noelle as though he was only just now really seeing her. “And then...then you must be...”

The jig was up. The time for secrets between them had passed. And if this was what it took to stop the violence, then...

Noelle took a shuddering breath, and pulled her mask up off her antlers.

“Noelle Holiday,” Asgore said, narrowing his eyes. “Of course. My youngest child and their best friends, Rudy's girls. It all makes sense now.” He let out a laugh that almost sounded tinged with madness. “What a bitter irony. I suppose this confrontation was inevitable, wasn't it?”

“Why did you do it, dad?” Kris questioned, their heartache evident in their voice. “Why would you do any of this? I just want to understand.”

Asgore's expression hardened, and he tightened his grip around Dess's neck. She choked and sputtered, her hooves kicking at thin air as she futilely tried to pry his fingers apart. “You could never understand. You're not a monster.”

“But I am,” Noelle called. “Please, Mr. Dreemurr, just put my sister down and we can talk, like civilized monsters. Help us understand. What does being a monster have to do with any of this?”

“It has everything to do with it!” Asgore growled. “You’re too young to remember the war, Noelle. It must seem like ancient history to you, events of decades past that you read about in school. But I remember. I was there. Your father and I... we were boss monsters, both of us. Longer lived than most. We grew up with the conflict, still young men when the war reached our homeland. Of course we enlisted. We were young, romantic fools with no idea what war was really like. We just wanted to do our part, to protect our people from humans and their ignorant, hateful *savagery*.” He spat the last word out like a curse. “I’ll never forget the things I saw in the war, the things humankind did to our people. Rudy and I, we survived, went on to live long lives. But many others did not.”

“But that’s all in the past!” Noelle reasoned. She still didn’t see how any of this could possibly justify his crimes, but she wasn’t about to let racism go unchallenged either way. “Humans and monsters signed the peace treaty, put aside their prejudices and came together.” She swept her arm out, gesturing at the roof’s edge and the city below. “New Home is proof that monsters and humans can live together in peace, as equals!”

“Equals...” Asgore repeated darkly. “You don’t make peace with predators. You don’t live as *equals* with animals. That’s what your father never understood. We fought for monsterkind and then the world changed around us, our cause pulled out from under our feet. All these years since, while I tolerated humanity’s presence around us, he *embraced* it. He *liked* making nice with the creatures that killed our friends back in the war. Rudy had a kind heart. He was never comfortable as a soldier. In this backwards world, he fit in. But I could never shake the feeling that the world had gone wrong.”

Kris stepped forward. “I don’t understand. If you hate humans so much, w-why did you adopt me?”

“Do you think it was my idea, Kris?” Asgore spat. “Your mother fell in love with the idea of raising a human. I think she hoped that you could soothe the part of me that still hated humanity. I resisted, but she wanted it so badly, and all I wanted was to make her happy, so I swallowed my pride and treated you like my own. I told myself it could be...an experiment. To see if a human could be raised among monsterkind, to be assimilated into our culture and reject its own kind’s violent ways.

“And over time, I did begin to care for you. I could not hate an innocent child, even a human one. I saw the way you grew up yearning to be a monster, to fit in with your family, and I began to think to myself, what if everything cruel and vicious about humanity was the result of nurture, and not nature? What if, with monsters leading the way, their worst instincts could be tamed? What if humans could be...”

Kris interrupted with a look of furious disbelief. “Domesticated? Like animals?” They stepped forward, fists balled and trembling. “You could have just let me be a monster! You could have let that be my choice! But no, you never saw past the

surface, did you? You didn't want me to be equal to monsters at all! You just wanted an obedient human pet!”

Asgore gave a bitter laugh. “Not a pet, Kris. A symbol. You were supposed to be the future of humans and monsters - a better breed of humanity. And look at you now, ‘Spider-Human.’ A so-called hero, dedicating yourself to protecting this mongrel abomination of a city. I never taught you to be this person, but I suppose I should be proud...if it weren’t for the fact that you still wear your human heritage like a badge of honor, right there in your chosen name.”

“Because you taught me that I had to!” Kris screamed. “I never asked to be human! I just wanted to make something good out of it, to be a hero, so I wouldn't have to feel so *wrong!*”

But Asgore merely scoffed. “I’ll tell you why you feel wrong, Kris - because you were a mistake. It was my mistake, and I'm sorry you had to suffer for it, but it's too late for regrets now. You’re no child of monsterkind, and you're no hero to them either. They’d be better off without you.”

Dess, still squirming in his grasp while he held her at arm’s length, managed to gasp out around the fingers slowly choking her, “Don’t talk about them that way, you goddamn bastard...”

Asgore gave her a sharp glare, but he didn't let her go. He seemed aware of the fact that his iron grip on Dess's neck was the only thing keeping the others from attacking him again. “Something you want to say while you still can, December?”

“Y-yeah!” Dess wheezed defiantly. “I think you’re...a pathetic bully. All these lies... the crime, the politics...the money and power? For what? All so you could...pursue some racist vendetta? Don't you see...how small that makes you?”

“You fail to grasp the scope of my ambition,” Asgore said. “Do you really think my greatest goal is to govern this one city? Taking control of the criminal element was just a means to an end. When the law has been twisted to serve human interests, then those laws must be defied until they can be changed. I *will* become Mayor tomorrow, but I don’t intend to stop there. Mayor of the biggest monster city today, leader of the free monster world tomorrow. And I will make it a *monster* world, mark my words. A better, safer world. A world of monster laws and monster order.”

“No wonder Dad tried to stop you,” Noelle said, horrified. “You’re out of control. These things you’re saying about humans, they’re...they’re deplorable! And by the time Dad learned the truth about you, it was too late, wasn’t it? He couldn’t turn a blind eye, and you couldn’t let it go. So...” She swallowed roughly, tears streaking the fur of her cheeks. “So you killed him, didn’t you? Didn’t you!”

Asgore stared coldly down at her, his hand still squeezing Dess’s neck, although she had begun to go limp, her struggles slowing.

“Rudy Holiday was my lover as a young man, my brother in arms as a soldier, and my best friend for decades afterwards,” Asgore said somberly. “I loved him with all my heart. But there is no place for men like him in the world I must create. So yes, I had to kill him. And as much as I wanted to see his legacy survive, it seems you leave me no choice.” He turned to face the rooftop’s edge, raising the hand that held Dess. “You want December, Spider-Doe? Go and get her!”

He swung his arm wide and threw Dess off the roof. She took a great, gasping breath when he released her that turned into a fading, breathless scream as she dropped out of sight.

“NO!” Noelle didn’t hesitate, didn’t stop to think. She sprinted to the edge of the roof and dove off into thin air after her sister.

Dess was hard to make out as the air whipped against Noelle’s face. She was still holding her mask in one hand, and she quickly pulled it over her face to protect her watering eyes from the wind. Blinking her vision clear, she fixed her gaze on the other doe, a black dot of flailing limbs against the lights of the city below.

“Hang on, I’m coming!” Noelle yelled, but her words were lost to the wind; the same wind that was carrying Dess’s screams up to her own ears. She tried to straighten her body like an arrow, arms out in front of her as she fell, so that the wind would slow her down as little as possible. That was her one hope: To fall faster than Dess, fast enough to bridge the gap between them and catch her, before time ran out for both of them.

But the ground was coming up fast, the rooftops of the shorter buildings below rushing up to meet them. The climb to the top of Kingpin’s skyscraper had taken so long and felt so high, but it took far, far less time to fall.

Dess was gradually growing larger in her vision, getting closer. It was working, but would it work fast enough? Noelle tried to stay calm, to count in her head as she fell, estimating both the rate at which she was closing the distance between them, and the seconds she had left until it was too late.

The calculations weren’t looking good. She was almost there, she could see Dess’s terrified face clearly now. Her sister was stretching an arm out to reach her, and Noelle was reaching back, but if she didn’t pull out of this dive within seconds, then...

She couldn’t think that way. She had to make it. Even if she didn’t have time to slow down, even if all she could do was to break Dess’s fall and throw her into a webbed-up safety net, then she would make that sacrifice.

Wait. Webs.

Webs webs webs webs webs!

For a moment, in her panic, Noelle had forgotten that she was more than just a scared, desperate doe falling to her death. She was Spider-Doe. She was a

superhero. Her strength exceeded the limits of her peers, and her reach extended past the limits of her arms.

As they fell past the rooftops, a shining street of headlights rushing up to meet them like a river of death, Noelle shot a webline towards her sister.

The webbing hit Dess in the chest and held fast. With her other hand, Noelle shot blindly at the highest point she could on the side of a building just ahead of her. At the same time she pulled Dess upward, the stretchy web absorbing her momentum and bouncing her back up towards Noelle like a bungee cord. Noelle caught her and held her tightly under one arm as the other webline grew taut and swung her into a fast, tight arc above the street.

Noelle's hooves practically grazed the tops of the cars. She tucked her legs up towards her chest as she flew over the street and back up again. At the apex of her arc, high enough that she was level with the rooftops, she dropped down to the nearest flat roof, cradling Dess's head protectively against her chest as she fell into a roll, tumbling antlers over heels.

Finally they came to a halt, bruised and battered but alive, panting on the roof beneath the smoggy sky and distant stars above.

Dess rolled over and ejected the contents of her stomach.

When Dess was done puking, and Noelle had had a moment to catch her breath, she propped herself up and wrapped her arms around her sister, pulling Dess into a hug from behind. "You're okay. Oh god, Dess, are you okay??"

"I've...been better," Dess coughed weakly, but hugged Noelle's arms with her own. Noelle could feel Dess's heart beating like a jackhammer; her own heart wasn't much calmer. "Angel above, Noelle, that was incredible! You saved my goddamn life!"

"Of course I did!" Noelle said, laughing with relief. "What are sisters for?" Noelle turned Dess around to face her, and they embraced for a proper hug, clinging tight to one another.

At least until Dess suddenly pulled away and exclaimed, "Shit, I just realized. Where's Kris?"

Noelle frowned, looking back up at the skyscraper they had just fallen from. Kris was nowhere to be seen, and there was only one reason she could think of why they wouldn't have followed after her and Dess: Somehow, Asgore had stopped them from doing so.

Which meant they were still in danger.

"Berdly!" she shouted, clambering to her hooves and thumbing the communicator in her ear. "Berdly, do you copy?"

His voice came to her a second later. "Noelle! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. What about Kris?"

"I've been trying to contact them," Berdly said. "They aren't responding. But," he added quickly, "I'm still getting life signs from their suit's biometric data. Judging from their heart rate, they're most likely unconscious."

That didn't make Noelle feel much more than a brief moment of relief: Asgore may be Kris's father, but after tonight she didn't think for a second that he wasn't capable of killing them. "I'm going back up there," she announced.

"I'm coming too," Dess said, though she looked like just the thought was going to make her sick again.

But Noelle shook her head. "No. I'm sorry, but I have to get up there as fast as possible, and carrying you will slow me down. Besides, I'm not sure I can save you a second time if you get thrown off a building again."

"But I want to help!"

"You can help by getting those letters to the Monster Bugle office. You have them, right?"

Dess's eyes widened as she remembered. "Oh yeah!" She unzipped her skintight leather suit just enough to stick a hand down her front and pull out a pair of crumpled sheets of paper. "Swiped them off his desk when I was still invisible," she said with a grin.

"Good. And Berdly, you got the audio of him confessing to the murder?"

"I have it," Berdly confirmed. "A little selective editing to preserve your identity, and it'll be sent straight to the inbox of the Bugle."

"Then we have what we came for," Noelle said. "Kingpin's finished. All I have to do now is make sure Kris gets out of there in one piece."

"Are you sure you've got this?" Dess asked. "I don't want to leave you."

"I know. But your mission is more important right now. If you don't get that evidence to the media, then this was all for nothing. I'm just going to run up there, grab Kris out from under Asgore's nose, and get out. I won't try to fight him alone."

"Fine," Dess relented. "But I'm making this fast and then I'm coming right back here. If you and Kris aren't waiting for me on this rooftop when I get back, then I'm fighting my goddamn way through that building to rescue you, you got that?"

"Sounds like a plan," Noelle said with a smile. She gave Dess one last quick hug before parting ways. "Now go! I'll meet you back here, I promise."

Dess pulled her grapple gun from her belt and swung off into the night, while Noelle reluctantly turned away and headed off in the other direction, back towards the skyscraper looming above.

You better be okay, Kris. I'm coming.

But before she could get more than a few blocks, her scalp burst into a frenzy of tingling shivers. Her spider-sense was suddenly going haywire, and that could mean only one thing.

Danger!

She looked around while she kept swinging, but no threat immediately presented itself. She could tell she was in danger, but from what? And where?

And then she saw a black shape perched on the edge of a nearby rooftop. The figure was hard to make out in the shadows, but she had just enough time to see them raise some kind of gun and point it at her.

Noelle twisted in midair and shot a burst of webbing at the gun to jam it or knock it aside, but she was a moment too late. She heard a loud *THWUNK* and a second later, a spinning bolas of steel cables slammed into her legs, wrapping tight around her and knocking her out of the arc of her swing.

She cried out as she went flying head over heels through the air. Everything was spinning so fast, and she couldn't tell up from down long enough to shoot a web to stop her fall.

But then something caught the cables around her legs and plucked her out of her freefall, yanking her ankles upwards so that she was dangling upside down in the air as the buildings sped by. Noelle hoisted herself up at the waist, dizzy and disoriented, to look up and see who or what was carrying her away.

Above her, a black-feathered bird monster held a grappling hook's rope clutched tightly in their claws, flapping their wings and flying through the city as though the extra weight wasn't a burden to them at all.

Noelle had no idea why this bird was trying to abduct her, but she wasn't about to sit back and let it happen. She pushed herself further into a midair sit-up, examining the cables that bound her legs together. They were made of slender but durable steel, and she had nothing to cut them with.

But what she did have was her arms free.

Noelle waited until there were buildings on both sides of her, then thrust her arms out, shot web lines to each side, and held on tight. A moment later, the bird monster carrying her was jerked to a sudden halt like a dog reaching the end of its leash. The hook tethered to her legs yanked her upwards, but her webbing was stronger, and the rope slipped from the bird's grasp.

She was free. Or, well, her legs were still bound and that made her substantially less maneuverable, but she didn't need her legs to swing. She just needed to lose her would-be kidnapper, and then she could figure out the rest from there.

Noelle spared a second for a quick glance over her shoulder, just long enough to see the bird arcing through the air and flying straight towards her. He held a knife in his beak, and there was something strange about his eyes that Noelle didn't like the look of at all. Still, she forced herself to wait until the last possible moment before he closed the gap between them.

Then she let go of the webbing and let herself drop, her attacker speeding right past her.

It was a fast fall, weighed down by the bolas around her legs, but she only let herself fall a few feet before twisting around in mid-air, attaching a web to a nearby building and swinging away.

She was heading nowhere in particular, just trying to get away. But webslinging with her legs held together felt more awkward than she'd anticipated, and she didn't have to look behind her to know that she was being followed. Her spider-sense was still tingling all over.

Noelle swung as fast as she could, zipping around corners and trying to shake her pursuer. It was a real test of her web-slinging skills; one that she was failing. Despite all the hours spent practicing with Kris over the past week, her web-shooters were a poor substitute for the maneuverability of a born flier. No matter how she weaved her way through the urban jungle, the bird remained hot on her tail - and they were gaining on her fast.

A rapid series of *beep beep, beep beep, beep beep* sounds sent her heart rate spiking: That was her web-shooters alerting her that the built-in web fluid tanks were almost empty. She had more cartridges in her belt, but there was no time to stop for a refill, and if she ran out in mid-air...

Running wasn't getting her anywhere. It was time to make a stand.

Noelle spotted a nearby rooftop that was lower than the surrounding buildings and swung down to it. She made an imperfect landing, tripping over her hooves and having to catch herself before she fell on her face. With a grunt of frustration she rolled over and started trying to rip away the cables binding her. They were pulled tight around her legs and too durable to break, but if she could just untangle them enough to slip free...

By design, the weights had gotten all tangled in the cables, holding the whole thing together. It would take ages to undo the ends. Unless...

Noelle quickly took one of the round weights between her palms and squeezed. It wasn't made of steel like the cables, but merely concrete, and was no match for her super strength. It took some effort, but the ball soon crumbled in her hands.

The other two quickly followed, and Noelle was just untying the now-loose ends of the cables and pulling her legs free when the bird who had been chasing her alighted on the roof a few yards away.

"Okay, that's it!" Noelle shouted, springing to her hooves to face them. Kris would have made some kind of witty wisecrack, but this monster was delaying her from rescuing them, and Noelle was in no mood for superheroic banter. "I don't have time for this! Who are you and what do you want from me?"

The bird took a step closer. In the light from the windows of the surrounding buildings, Noelle could see that he wore a sleeveless leather jacket with a fur collar, and camo-print pants. His feathers were sleek and shiny, his physique

surprisingly muscular for an avian monster. And now that she was closer, she could see what had disturbed her about his eyes: His pupils were dilated, showing more white than should have been visible.

He unstrapped some kind of spear from his back; or wait, no. On closer inspection, it wasn't a spear, just a staff - the tip wasn't pointed.

"I am Raven," the bird proclaimed. "Raven the Hunter. And I have been tracking you all night, waiting for the perfect time to strike, once you were separated from your companions. For you see, Spider-Doe...you are my prey."

He slammed the base of the staff against the rooftop, and the other end suddenly crackled with electricity.

"Whoa!" Noelle cried, leaping back. The fact that it was a non-lethal weapon didn't bring her much comfort - that stun staff looked like it packed a nasty punch. "Hold up a minute! I didn't consent to being anyone's prey!"

"Prey never does," Raven said, spinning the staff theatrically. "And I have conquered every type of prey imaginable. Ferocious human warriors, monsters of all kinds. But never one like you. This new breed of superbeings..." He pointed the staff at her, shifting into a combat pose. "You will make the ultimate prey! That is why I took this job - not just for money, but for the honor of defeating you."

"Wait, wait, what?! Someone's paying you to fight me? Who put you up to this? Was it Kingpin?"

"The identity of my employer does not matter!" Raven squawked. "But, yes, you have surmised correctly. It was the man known as Kingpin. But do not think me some mere mercenary! I would not have accepted his offer if I thought the job was beneath me."

"I don't care about your stupid pride!" Noelle said, exasperated. "Kingpin has a friend of mine captive and I'm going there to rescue them, so if he wants to kill me, he can do it himself. Your services are no longer required, understand?"

"Ah, but I was not hired to kill you, Spider-Doe. I am to deliver you to another."

"What? Another who?"

"You will find out soon enough, once my contract is fulfilled. And I will take your antlers for my trophy wall."

"L-Like hell you will!" Noelle sputtered. "You're insane! I'm not some trophy animal and I'm nobody's prey, so if you want me, just try and take me!"

Raven smiled. "Then may our battle be the stuff of legend!"

With a screech like a warcry, he lunged at her. Even for a bird monster he moved shockingly fast. Only instinct and the second's worth of advance warning from her spider-sense allowed Noelle to jump out of the way, the electrified butt of the staff just barely missing her.

She seized the chance for a counter-attack, leaping towards him with her fist pulled back for a powerful blow. With her super strength, she felt confident she could end this fight before it began if she could only land a strong enough punch to take the crazed hunter down.

But Raven recovered quickly, pivoting on his foot and swinging back around in a half-circle. He slammed the back end of the staff - thankfully not the electrified side - into Noelle's upper chest, knocking her onto her back with a pained grunt. She cracked her head on the rooftop as she fell, and for a split-second her vision erupted in bright points of light like stars.

"I am disappointed," Raven said, looming over her. "I had hoped I would finally meet a worthy opponent, but you fight like an amateur. I suppose it is to be expected. I have studied every style of combat, mastered every manner of weapon from all the far-flung corners of the world, but you? You are just some girl with power she has not earned."

He raised the staff above her, the crackling voltage pointed at her belly, and thrust it downwards.

But Noelle had spent his monologue catching her breath, and he'd given her plenty of time to see the blow coming. At the last second, she rolled out of the way, then swung her leg in a swift kick, knocking Raven's thin bird legs out from under him. He fell down, while she sprang upright.

"How's that for unearned power! Also, cut me some slack, this is my second supervillain fight of the night and I'm not at my best, okay?"

"Hahaha," Raven cawed. "Perhaps I underestimated you. But in the end, your career will be nothing more than a footnote in mine."

Noelle knew she should press her advantage, but he was still holding the staff and it would have been all too easy for him to stun her with it if she got too close. Instead, she hung back, spun the nozzle settings on her web-shooters, and tried a different tactic. After all, if he was allowed to bring weapons to this fight, then why shouldn't she?

Raven was just getting to his feet when the spray of webbing fell on him, a dense net of sticky strands that would quickly cover him from head to toe. Noelle didn't really care about beating this guy, no matter how much he tried to bruise her ego. She may be low on web fluid, but if she could just immobilize him long enough to get down to the street and change out of her costume, she could blend into the crowd where he couldn't track her. Then once she'd lost him, she could double back and try to reach Kris and make sure they were okay.

Those plans were dashed, however, when Raven simply ducked his head and thrust the electrified staff up above him. As the net fell upon the tip, it began to burn the webbing away, the strong electric current disintegrating the thin strands of adhesive.

Noelle's eyes widened behind the lenses of her mask. She'd never thought to test the effects of electricity on her webbing; she'd had no idea that enough voltage

could destroy it.

“Did you think I came unprepared for your tricks?” Raven boasted, as the remaining strands burned up around him in little licks of flame. “I always do my research on the abilities of my prey. There’s nothing you can do that I cannot counter.”

“We’ll see about that!” Noelle snapped, adjusting her web-shooters again. Maybe the thinner webbing strands could be destroyed, but liquid globs of it might be another matter. If she could just glue his feet to the floor...

But when she raised her arms to fire, the web-shooters just clicked and let out a pathetic little spurt. They were empty.

“Um...” Noelle said sheepishly. “I don’t suppose I could have a second to reload? You know, in the interests of sportsmanship and fair competition and all that?”

Raven narrowed his eyes. “I think not.”

Noelle sighed and raised her fists, falling into the combat stance that Kris had shown her. “At least drop the staff, then. Or are you too afraid to fight a girl without a weapon?”

“I fear nothing!” Raven exclaimed, throwing his weapon aside. “I have wrestled elephant monsters ten times your size into submission with my bare hands!”

“Wow, really?” Noelle mocked. “That’s soooo impressive! Let’s see if you can handle a doe with the proportionate power of a spider.” At least, she was pretty sure that was how her powers worked, even if it did sound a little unintimidating on paper.

Raven lunged at her again, but she was ready for him, ducking under his punch and returning it with a blow of her own. Noelle hit him hard in the gut, then followed that up with an uppercut to the jaw for good measure. She put the full force of her newfound strength into both blows, and Raven staggered backwards for a moment.

But he didn’t fall. He didn’t even seem stunned. He quickly regained his balance, cracked his neck, and came right back at her.

“Wha-” Noelle exclaimed. “How are you so strong?!”

“In my travels,” Raven said, throwing a punch that she narrowly deflected with her arms, “I came across a rare flower that grows only on the peak of Mt. Ebott. A flower the roots of which some say are infused with the SOULS of monsters and humans alike who died on the fields of combat many years ago. When crushed and imbibed in a mystic tea recipe known only to the local monster tribes, its petals grant any monster who consumes it the power of -”

“Yeah, okay, I get it already!” Noelle interrupted with another punch to the face. “You’re on magic steroids. Isn’t that kind of cheating?”

She pulled back for another punch, but Raven caught her fist in his palm, spun her around, and wrapped a wing tightly around her neck in a headlock. "There is no cheating in the hunt," he proclaimed. "Only the ingenuity to triumph against uneven odds."

Noelle slammed her elbow into his side again and again, thrashing against him, but he brushed off her struggles like they were nothing. With his free hand, he pulled a small knife from his belt and drew it in a quick slash across Noelle's abdomen.

It wasn't a deep cut, but the sudden pain made her scream. Fear flooded her brain and she redoubled her efforts to break the hunter's hold on her.

Then something unexpected happened: he let her go. Noelle staggered forward, clutching her middle, and tried to make a break for the rooftop, no longer caring about anything but putting distance between herself and this lunatic.

But something was wrong. Her legs and arms felt heavy and slow to respond to her brain's commands - and her mind, too, was moving sluggishly, as though she had just awoken from a deep sleep. Her head swam, everything doubling in her vision, the colors blurring.

"What...you..." Noelle tried to say. Her tongue felt numb and her mouth dry. "You poisoned me?"

"Only a tranquilizer," Raven said - but was it the one on the left speaking or the one on the right? Or both? "But a powerful and fast-acting one. A single dose would be enough to take down one of those elephant monsters I spoke of."

"You...hypocrite..." Noelle mumbled, dropping to her knees. It was like all her exhaustion was suddenly magnified a hundredfold. Every part of her body wanted to lie down and go to sleep, even as her mind fought to stay present. "How can you say you fight...for honor...if you don't...fight fair?"

The last thing she saw before passing out was Raven kneeling in front of her. "Oh, my poor prey. Consider who your opponent was. This was never a fair fight."

Noelle woke to bright fluorescent lights above her, causing pain behind her groggy eyes. She felt hungover, her superpowered metabolism fighting off the effects of the drug. It was hard to move, and those lights were so, so bright against her eyes...

Her eyes! She realized with a shock of clarity that she wasn't looking through the lenses of her eyepieces. Which meant she wasn't wearing her mask. Who had unmasked her? And where had she been taken?

She tried to sit up, willing strength back into her heavy limbs, only to find that it wasn't just the drug in her system preventing her from moving: Her ankles and wrists were bound by steel cuffs attached to a cold metal table. She was still wearing her costume, apart from her mask and her web-shooters; she could tell those had been removed because she couldn't feel them when she strained against her restraints.

She could just barely raise her head, just enough to see...lab equipment? She had thought for a moment that she might be in some kind of hospital, but that wasn't right. The equipment...those clean white walls... She knew them.

How long had she been out? She had no way to tell, but judging by how dizzy she still felt, she had a suspicion that the drug hadn't kept her under for as long as it would have for a normal person. Which meant that maybe, if she could get out of here quickly enough, she could still rescue Kris.

"H-hello?" she called out. Her voice was hoarse and raspy. "Anyone there? Let me go! You can't keep me here like this, there's been a mistake! I'm -"

"Sir? She's awake," came a voice from behind her. Noelle craned her neck, trying to look backwards, and caught a glimpse of a short human with coppery reddish-brown hair. They looked familiar, though she couldn't figure out where she might have seen them before.

She heard a door open a moment later, and a tall, skeletal figure wearing a lab coat drifted into her field of vision like a sleep paralysis demon looming over her, all bone-white skin and dark eyes. "Noelle Holiday. Or do you prefer to go by Spider-Doe now?"

Noelle's breath caught in her throat. "Dr. Gaster! Why -"

"I apologize for your rough treatment at the hands of that uncivilized mercenary," Gaster said calmly. "But I gave you every chance to come of your own accord. And for your own good, I could not afford to put off this conversation any longer."

"Wha- what conversation?" Noelle stammered. What on earth could Gaster have to say that was important enough to justify kidnapping her? "Look, it doesn't matter, I don't have time for this! You have to let me go! It could be a matter of life or death!"

"That is ironic, Ms. Holiday," Gaster said, steeping his hands in front of him. "Because that's exactly what I so urgently need to speak to you about: Matters of life or death."

Chapter 15: The Experiment

“No! Dess! Noelle!”

Kris sprinted forward, following Noelle as she threw herself off the roof after her sister. But they only got a few paces before Asgore moved to intercept them, wrapping his burly arms around them and crushing them against his chest in a tight bear hug. “Oh no you don’t. I think it’s time we had a chat, Kris. Father to child.”

“Let me go!” Kris gasped, but with their arms pinned to their sides and their feet lifted off the ground, they had no leverage to strike back. Squirm as they might against their father’s arms, Asgore’s musculature held its own against their enhanced strength. “I have to help them! You might have just killed Dess!”

“Yes, I was aware that throwing her off a skyscraper could have that effect,” Asgore said dryly. He carried the struggling Kris back inside, every foot and every second bringing them further and further away from being able to save their friends.

“No...” Kris said weakly, going limp in Asgore’s arms as they realized it was too late for them to help. “No, Noelle will catch her. She has to.”

“Maybe she will,” Asgore admitted. “But even if she does, I have a man waiting in the wings who will be more than capable of keeping any surviving Holiday girls out of my hair. And if December lives, I can always have her killed later - I just needed to thin the herd of nuisances up here so that you and I can take care of some family business.”

“What do you want from me?” Kris demanded.

“Just to talk. But I have a feeling that if I let you go, we’ll go right back to hitting each other, won’t we? I don’t want that, Kris, so instead, I need you to go to sleep for a little while.”

He tightened his grip around them, and Kris gasped as their middle was compressed, squeezed to the point of breathlessness. Their father’s body was like a brick wall, more muscle than fat, and the sensation of being crushed against him felt like a perversion of every hug, every tender childhood embrace he’d ever given them.

Kris gasped and choked. Their ribs were on fire, and their spine wasn’t faring much better. Their lungs struggled to expand. Fear spiked inside their brain.

“Dad...please...”

And then their eyes rolled up in their skull, and the darkness on the edges of their vision crowded in.

Noelle struggled against the restraints binding her to the table, but the thick metal bands didn't yield. She wished she had spent more time testing the upper limits of her strength; it would have been nice to know what kind of bonds she could break out of *before* getting captured.

"Please, remain calm," Gaster said. "No one wishes to cause you harm." He spoke so casually, as though she were a normal guest instead of tied to a steel table like a lab animal.

"Tell that to your brute of a henchman who drugged and kidnapped me!" Noelle spat. "He said he was going to take my antlers as trophies."

"I dissuaded him of that notion," Gaster said. "Rest assured, your horns remain intact."

"I did make sure to specify a lack of lasting physical harm in the terms of his employment," Gaster's human assistant added.

Noelle was relieved to hear it, but that wasn't really the point. "I don't get it, Dr. Gaster. I guess you've figured out my secret, but what was so important that you had to bring me here by force?"

Gaster sighed and moved to a table nearby. There were some kind of instruments on it, but Noelle couldn't see what he was doing with his back turned to her.

After a moment, he said, "Do you know why you came to be bitten by that spider? What made that arachnid unique, and what such a creature was doing in Gastcorp's care?"

"I guess not," Noelle admitted. "I figured it was just some kind of experiment. Genetic engineering or something?"

"That it was," Gaster said. He turned back to her, holding a large syringe with a long needle. "I'll just need to take a blood sample. Please hold still for a moment."

Noelle flinched away, at least to the limited extent that she could. She had never liked needles under the best of circumstances. "W-Wait, Dr. Gaster! I didn't consent to that!"

But the human with the rosy cheeks and pale skin was already tying a blue strip of rubber tightly around her arm.

"I'm afraid your consent is not required, Ms. Holiday," Gaster said. "You see, you have Gastcorp's intellectual property in your veins. From a certain legal standpoint, one could argue that your blood constitutes stolen property."

While he spoke, the human produced a small pocket knife and carefully cut her costume open at the sleeve, just above the steel cuff holding her wrist down.

They probed her fur with their fingertips, looking for a vein. “Here,” they said, tapping a spot on her arm.

“That’s absurd!” Noelle protested. “No one owns my blood but me! And I didn’t steal anything! It was an accident!”

“Be that as it may,” Gaster said, “this is for your own good. You’ll feel a slight prick...”

Noelle looked away squeamishly and closed her eyes as he pushed the needle in. It did hurt just a little, but she focused on steadying her breathing and keeping her eyes dry. She wasn’t the little fawn who used to cry when she had to get shots at the doctor’s office anymore; she was a superhero now for Angel’s sake. It wasn’t the discomfort of the needle that was getting to her so much as the humiliation of being strapped down and poked and prodded against her will.

Gaster handed the now full syringe to his assistant. “Chara, please transfer this to a test tube and prep it for cold storage delivery.”

“Alright, you’ve got your blood sample,” Noelle said hotly once the syringe was withdrawn. “Now can you let me out of these cuffs so we can talk like civilized monsters?”

“Not advisable,” Chara said to Gaster. They hadn’t addressed Noelle directly even once, seeming to treat her like she was just another lab rat.

Gaster eyed her dispassionately. “Considering you are a rather upset monster with super strength and a growing predilection for fisticuffs, I think I will leave you where you are until you’ve had a chance to calm down.”

Noelle grunted in frustration. “Then at least tell me what this is all about. You said it was a matter of life and death, so stop beating around the bush.”

“Very well,” Gaster said. While Chara left the room to go store the blood sample, Gaster leaned over Noelle. “Many years before you were born, after the signing of the peace treaty that brought the war between monsters and humankind to a close, monster scientists began conducting classified research into the so-called ‘magic’ that gave humans an advantage over us. A substance known as Determination.”

“We learned about this in school,” Noelle said. “It’s what makes their SOULs so much stronger than ours.”

“Indeed,” Gaster nodded. “It was thought that if we could tap into that well of power, buttress our SOULs with human strength, we could close the gap in the arms race between our species. A contingency plan, in case hostilities ever resumed.”

“I’m guessing that didn’t work out so well, or I would have heard about it.”

“It did not,” Gaster confirmed. “Monster SOULs were incompatible with human Determination. Attempts to combine the two proved unstable. Even today, with all our advancements in technology, it has proven a tough nut to crack. I have

been conducting experiments, trying to synthesize more stable forms of Determination and testing them on lesser life forms. But the results have been largely...unsatisfactory.”

He produced from his lab coat a test tube containing some kind of goopy red mess, and held it up to the light in front of Noelle’s face.

She wrinkled her nose in disgust. “What’s this supposed to be?”

“That,” Gaster said, “is all that remains of one of the aforementioned test subjects. Once injected with Determination, its physical structure broke down.”

Noelle recoiled. “You’ve been testing something so dangerous on animals? *Killing* them?”

“There is always a price for scientific advancement, Noelle. You should know this.”

“But there are laws against that! It was deemed immoral...”

Gaster appeared unmoved. “Morality is merely a social construct that too often serves as an impediment to progress, like a regressive evolutionary mistake. But you’re missing the point. Only one test subject’s body did not reject the new element - an arachnid. That spider got loose from containment and, we believe, bit a human highschooler during a field trip to Gastcorp a couple years ago. It has taken us this long to find another spider that survived the process, only for history, it would seem, to repeat itself. If it were not so irritating, I would almost appreciate the irony.”

“So that’s it,” Noelle challenged. “You kidnapped me because I’m just a valuable experiment to you.”

Gaster leaned in close to her face. “I *intervened* because your life may be in danger. No monster before you has managed to survive indefinitely with even trace amounts of Determination in their body. With you, the synthesis of Determination and spider venom seems to have given you extraordinary strength and abilities, but what if all that is merely the high before the inevitable crash?” He drew back, tapping his bony fingers against the steel table. “You are living with an ax hanging over your head.”

Noelle gulped. “You’re saying I could end up like...” She let her eyes finish for her, glancing down at the pocket where Gaster had stashed that gruesome test tube. “But it’s been over a week and I feel fine! Better than fine!”

“That does not necessarily mean that your body has stabilized. Your condition could still change rapidly,” Gaster said. “That is why I want you here for testing and observation.”

“But that’s -” Noelle sputtered. “You can’t just keep me prisoner! I have school, and - and my mother will be looking for me!” *And Kris too, if they’re okay, Angel willing.*

“A cover story is already being prepared to explain your absence,” Chara said quietly, making Noelle jump - she hadn’t heard the human slip back into the room. Something about their quiet, calm voice was tugging at her memory, but she was still too woozy from the tranquilizer to put the pieces together. “We don’t need you for that long - just a few days, to conduct tests. Your mother will be told a version of the truth - that we’ve extended you a job offer and you are spending the weekend here for an intensive orientation period.”

“She’ll never buy that!” Noelle said. “She’ll want to hear it from me directly.”

Chara looked eagerly at Gaster. “Can I demonstrate?”

The skeletal scientist nodded his assent, and Chara pulled down the collar of their lab coat to reveal a small, circular electronic device affixed to their throat. They pressed a button on it, cleared their throat, and then spoke in a voice that sounded exactly like Noelle’s. “Hi Mom, it’s me. Yeah, I packed some clothes and a spare toothbrush, and the guest rooms here are pretty nice. It’s like a fancy hotel! I have everything I need, so don’t worry about me. They’re working me really hard but I’m sure it’ll get easier once I learn the ropes a bit. I’ll be home in a few days. Love you!”

Noelle stared at them, wide-eyed. “How did you do that?”

Chara rubbed a thumb over the implant on their throat. When they answered her, it was with their own voice again. “It’s one part recording device and one part AI-generated voice modulator. It ‘learns’ other people’s voices and allows you to mimic them. Real high-tech spy stuff from Gastcorp’s R&D division.” They smirked. “Those guys have way too much time on their hands if you ask me.”

“That particular invention has not been announced to the public,” Gaster clarified, “so I’d appreciate it if you kept it between us.”

“The point is,” Chara said, “no one’s going to come looking for you.”

“But...but you can’t keep me here forever! When my mom hears what really happened -”

Chara folded their arms on the edge of the table by Noelle’s head, leaning down and tilting their own head to smile playfully at her. “Oh, did you intend to reveal your secret identity to her over this? Regardless, I wouldn’t worry too much. We can cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“Well, then,” Gaster said, “now that we all understand each other...” He approached Noelle with the syringe again. “That last blood sample was payment for services rendered. I’ll need another for my own personal analysis. Please hold still.”

He put the needle in her arm for a second time, making Noelle wince and hold back a squeal at the jab of pain. But he made it fast, moving with care and precision, and after a moment he withdrew. “I have no doubt this will prove fascinating. Your blood will have much to teach me, Noelle. The potential breakthroughs, the secrets waiting to be unlocked...” For a moment there was a

shine in his normally black eyes, his previous concern for her well-being superseded by naked ambition. "You should really consider this an honor."

Noelle glared at him. "Yeah, I feel *so* honored right now."

Gaster ignored the sarcasm. "I will need a few hours to analyze this sample," he said as he transferred the blood to a test tube. "Chara, stay here in the meantime and keep an eye on our guest. Please make sure she remains secure and that all her essential needs are met."

And with that, he left the room, not sparing Noelle so much as a second glance.

"Well, how do you like that?" Chara said. They were still hovering uncomfortably close over Noelle's face, looking down at her with a predatory glint in their eyes. "After all the trouble I went to arranging your abduction, I still get stuck on boring old guard duty. Talk about *deja vu*, huh Noelle?"

For a moment Noelle frowned, confused. Then her eyes widened, a gasp of recognition torn from her mouth. "You were at the house! You're one of my mom's security guards!" Maybe if she'd ever bothered having a conversation with the guards, instead of merely tolerating their presence, she would have recognized the human sooner. "But...I don't understand. What were you doing there, if you actually work for Dr. Gaster?"

"Can't a person have two jobs?" Chara flashed a sly smile. "But as it happens, I wasn't watching your house on Dr. Gaster's orders. I serve another master, you see." They reached into their pocket and pulled a thin, shiny knife out of a leather sheath, holding it up and angling it slightly back and forth, seemingly mesmerized by the way it caught the light. "I believe you've met the Kingpin?"

A thrill of fear went through Noelle, a shiver running up her spine that had nothing to do with the cold table under her back. "You...you work for Asgore."

"Yes," Chara said happily. "Mr. Dreemurr trusts me with a great deal. He knows I can handle whatever is required of me, whether it be spying on Gaster or taking care of any meddlesome obstacles that get in the way of his destiny." They winked at her. "Like you."

"But Chara," Noelle tried to reason with them, "you're a human. Asgore *hates* humans. I heard it from his own mouth - he believes in monster supremacy. He wants to turn humans into second-class citizens."

"Well, of course!" Chara said, spreading their arms wide and grinning. "And I agree with him."

Noelle stared at them in horror. "You *want* to be oppressed?"

Chara just shrugged. "They did it to the monsters first. Humans are awful, Noelle. I'm not proud to be one. But I *am* proud to serve a great man like Asgore Dreemurr. He'll be the King of the world one day, and I'll be his faithful right hand."

"I - I'll tell Gaster when he comes back!" Noelle threatened in desperation. "He'll have you arrested!"

"Oh, I don't think that will matter," Chara said. "Even if he believes you, this ruse has served its purpose. We already have what we need." They put their hand in their pocket again and produced a vial of blood - the one Gaster had taken from Noelle. "I am going to deliver this personally. And with it, Asgore will be unstoppable."

"But...but it's unstable," Noelle said. "You heard what Gaster said. It's dangerous!"

"Don't listen to that old worrywart," Chara said. "All that stuff about how the Determination in your blood might make you dissolve into a goopy puddle? That was just his way of trying to scare you into cooperating. I've been telling him all along! If anything bad was gonna happen to you..."

"...it already would have by now," Noelle finished.

Chara grinned. "Clever girl. Besides...you have more immediate problems to worry about." They ran their knife casually along Noelle's abdomen, just tracing it lightly, criss-crossing the cut that Raven's knife had left earlier.

Chara wasn't putting enough pressure on the blade to break the skin, but even so, Noelle couldn't help but flinch, sucking in her stomach. "Wh-what are you going to do to me?"

"To you? Nothing, Noelle, nothing. You've made yourself too valuable for all that. At least for now." They withdrew the knife, letting Noelle release the breath she'd been holding in. "Now be quiet while I call Asgore and let him know that you're out of the picture and I'm on my way. He's gonna be so proud of me!"

A buzz came from the human's pocket, along with a notification chime. Noelle recognized the familiar, brief trumpet sound as a breaking news ping from the Monster Bugle's app. Chara held up a finger towards her, returning the knife to their pocket, and pulled out their phone. They squinted, a look of confusion sliding onto their face. "What the..." They tapped on something, and the look of confusion turned into one of disbelief. "No...no, no, no. No, it can't be."

"What is it? What's wrong?" Noelle asked, though she had a sneaking suspicion that she already knew the answer. It would seem that the Monster Bugle worked fast when they had the story of the year dropped in their laps.

Chara read aloud, less for Noelle's benefit and seemingly more just unconsciously, their eyes glued to the screen. "The Bugle has obtained shocking new evidence implicating Mayoral candidate and local business leader Asgore Dreemurr in the unsolved murder of Rudolph Holiday, husband of incumbent Mayor Carol Holiday, who was shot and killed in what appeared to be an attempted burglary last year. No suspect was ever apprehended..." Their face contorted into an angry grimace. "They can't have evidence! There wasn't supposed to BE any evidence!"

“Too bad.” It was impossible for Noelle to suppress a gloating smile at Chara’s consternation. “We got the confession from his own lips, and more besides that. Tell your boss that the next time he kills someone’s father, he shouldn’t write about it in his diary!”

Chara slammed their fist on the table between Noelle’s legs. “Don’t say that! He *didn’t* kill anyone! THAT’S WHAT HE HAS ME FOR!”

It was like the pit of Noelle’s stomach fell away. For a second, she couldn’t breathe; if her hands were free, she would have covered her mouth in shock. “You... It was *you*.”

The “burglar” who was never caught. The assassin who was never brought to justice. Of course. His letter had mentioned this. Asgore hadn’t done his dirty work himself. He had made this crazy human do it for him.

Her father’s murderer was standing over her, whipped into an angry frenzy, while she lay there bound and helpless.

“I covered my tracks!” Chara ranted while Noelle renewed her efforts to strain against the steel cuffs. “I did it *perfectly*. And now you’re going to try and make him take the fall for it?! I - I won’t let you ruin everything!”

“You killed my father!” Noelle shouted back in impotent rage. “You - you monster!”

“If only I were. Maybe then I wouldn’t have messed up.” They took out their knife again and held it to Noelle’s throat, hatred in their eyes. “Shhh. Don’t struggle. I can still fix this. I won’t fail him.”

“Wa-wait!” Noelle squeaked. “Asgore wouldn’t want you to kill me! It won’t fix anything! You said it yourself, I’m too valuable.”

Chara narrowed their eyes. “But I already have your blood.”

Noelle tried to squirm away from their knife, but there was nowhere to retreat to. “What if it’s not enough? If you spill my blood all over this lab now, Kingpin won’t be happy if he needs more later.”

Chara’s nostrils flared, their hand clenched so hard around the knife handle that their knuckles turned white. But then they finally withdrew it, leaving Noelle to breathe a shaky sigh of relief.

“Very well. I suppose you can’t do any more damage now.” They sheathed their knife and turned to go. “But I can.”

Noelle strained against her bonds. Were they starting to buckle a little, or was it just her wishful imagination? “Wait! Where are you going?”

Chara paused, their back turned to her. “I’m late for my second job. You want to throw a wrench into the election? Fine. Two can play at that game. Let’s see what happens when one of the candidates never makes it to Election Day.” They

looked back over their shoulder, an unhinged smile on their face. “You mess with my family, I mess with yours.”

Kris awoke with a gasp to find themselves tied to a chair - arms twisted behind them, wrists connected to bound ankles, a length of rope securing their costumed torso to the chair's back. Asgore was sitting in another chair opposite them. They were back in his study, the cracked oak desk a painful reminder of how hard he could throw them around like a ragdoll if he wanted to.

“Good, you’re awake,” Asgore said, eyeing them. “I thought I saw you finally stirring.”

“How...how long was I out?” Kris groaned.

“Longer than I had planned. Things have gotten...hectic. I was taking the time while you slept to catch up on the news and take some phone calls. Mostly from my lawyers.” He held up his phone for them to see, where a Monster Bugle headline in big black letters read ‘ASGORE DREEMURR - MURDERER?’

“It would seem I’m the new you,” Asgore remarked coldly. “The media’s latest target - they do so love a smear campaign at the Bugle, don’t they? I suppose you and your friends think you’re very clever.”

“My friends...” Kris said weakly. Their chest was still burning, and the tight rope around them wasn't helping. “Are they...?”

“December, I’m assuming, survived her fall and got away with her pilfered evidence. The article mentions an anonymous source, and it can’t have been Noelle. I have it on good authority that Spider-Doe has been apprehended.”

“What?” Kris mumbled, shaking the cobwebs out of their head. “By whom?”

“My agent waiting in the wings,” Asgore said. “Though he’ll have delivered her elsewhere by now. I had a deal to uphold, you see. That girl has already made some powerful enemies besides myself.”

“What do you mean?” Kris demanded. “Where did they take her?”

“Does it matter? All you need to know is that you won't be seeing her again. Personally, I can't say I'm disappointed that someone else took her off the board for me. Unlike her sister, Noelle is a nice girl, and I have nothing against her. I would have hated to have to kill her, too.”

Kris pulled at the ropes, snarling with rage. “If anyone hurts her, I’ll -”

“Don’t worry about her,” Asgore said sternly. “Worry about yourself.”

Kris gritted their teeth. They felt furious and feral, like a cornered animal. “These ropes won’t hold me for long.”

“No, but they’ll hold you long enough,” Asgore said, leaning forward threateningly. “Long enough that if I see you starting to break free, I can put you down again.”

“What’s the point?” Kris challenged. “You can’t put the truth back in the bottle. The evidence is out there now. It’s over.”

“Is it?” Asgore took a slow, deep breath and smoothed his beard, like he was trying to calm himself down. “Your stolen evidence won’t hold up in court. You may have delivered me a setback, but you’re not rid of me yet.” He shot them a chilling glare. “And I can’t let this betrayal go unpunished.”

Kris gulped, feeling a sudden spike of fear. “Hurting me is only going to make things worse for you.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Kris. But you leave me very little choice.”

He stood and took a step towards them. Kris’s spider-sense erupted, an unerring warning sign of genuine danger, and they felt their mask of angry defiance suddenly shatter. Asgore had hurt them before, yes, but only emotionally, in the messy way that parents sometimes hurt their children. This was different. They weren’t used to the idea that their father was a threat to their safety.

“I don’t understand!” they shouted, their voice breaking into a sob. “How could you do this? Any of this! All this time, my whole life... I thought you loved me. You never treated me like you hated me...” They sniffled, their voice thick with misery. “Was any of it real? Was I just a project to you? Just a way to make you feel superior?”

“Oh, Kris,” Asgore said, his deep voice sounding softer and gentler than Kris had heard it in years. He reached out and cupped the side of their face with his big paw. “I do love you. I want you to know that. I’ve learned to love you like you were my own. But it’s time we stopped lying to ourselves.”

Kris looked up at him with wide, frightened eyes. “Dad.. please...”

“I’m sorry, Kris.” There was genuine regret in the lines of Asgore’s face, but also a terrifying resolve. “I wish it hadn’t had to end this way. But the truth is, you’re not like your brother. You aren’t my flesh and blood. You’re not the future of humans and monsters. You were a failed experiment, and it’s time I corrected my mistake.”

He moved his hand higher, up to the side of their skull, resting against Kris’s frantically tingling scalp. And then he placed the other hand over their mouth and nose, palm pressed against their jaw, his furry fingers blocking their airways.

Kris released a muffled scream into his hand and squeezed their eyes shut tight.

Noelle lay back against the table, panting. She had been pushing her arms and legs against the steel bands nonstop since Chara left the room, but to no avail. She wanted to scream. Never in her life had she felt so helpless.

And then a voice reached her ear, distorted by static but still audible. “Noelle! Noelle, do you copy?”

“Berdly? Is that you? Can you hear me?”

“I can hear you!” Berdly chirped excitedly. “I was still picking up audio, but I couldn’t risk hailing you when your captors were present. I heard the whole thing, however.”

“Have you heard from Kris?”

“Not yet. I think they’re still unconscious. But to think positively, that also means they’re still alive.”

But that could still change, Noelle thought grimly.

“Berdly, are you able to patch me through to Dess?” she asked.

“That I can do! One moment...”

Berdly’s voice cut out, and was replaced a second later by her sister’s. “Noelle! I just got back to that rooftop by Kingpin’s place and you’re not here. Where the hell are you and Kris?”

“I was captured. I’m being held prisoner at Gastcorp. But never mind me,” she added quickly. “How fast can you get back to the house?”

“That’s on the other end of town, and I don’t travel as fast as you, so...maybe 20 minutes if I push myself. Why? What’s back at the house that’s more important than rescuing you?”

“There’s no time to explain. A human who works for Kingpin is on their way there to kill Mom.”

Noelle winced as the earpiece erupted in profanity. “Son of a - I’m on my way! Don’t worry, Noelle, I’ll stop them. What about you and Kris, though?”

“I’ll be okay, I’m not in any immediate danger for now. And Kris...well, I don’t know, but Berdly says they’re still alive and I have to trust that they can take care of themselves for now.” It was a tough call to make, but there wasn’t much else she could do.

“Shit...okay.” Noelle could hear Dess breathing heavily and pictured her running across the rooftops, racing to get there before Chara. “Anything else I should know about this human?”

She decided not to mention that it was the same person who had killed their dad - Dess was likely to fly off the handle if she knew that, and Noelle needed her sister sharp right now, not making reckless mistakes. "You'll recognize them. Kingpin had them posing as one of our security guards so he could have someone close to us. A knife waiting to stab us in the back if he had to."

"I'm gonna \$@*&ing kill someone," Dess growled. "All right, I need to save my breath now. I'll call you the minute Mom's safe."

"Please, be careful. This human is dangerous."

The moment Dess's voice cut off and the call ended, Noelle couldn't help but get the sinking feeling that she had just sent her big sister to her death.

"Berdly?" she said quietly into the stillness of the lab. "Are you still there?"

His comfortingly familiar voice crackled to life in her ear. "I'm here. I also took the liberty of placing an anonymous call to the police, just in case they can get there faster than December."

"Thank you, Berdly. I need to get out of here, but I'm strapped down to this table by steel wrist and ankle cuffs. I've tried and tried but they won't budge. What do I do?"

"Steel, you said?"

"Mmhm."

"Kris can bend steel," Berdly said. "We tested it, back when they were still learning how to use their powers."

"Well that's great for them," Noelle huffed, "but it doesn't help me." She knocked her head back against the table in frustration. "Maybe I'm just not as strong as them..."

"Why, because you're a monster and not a human? Noelle, that is pure poppycock! Even before you got super-powers, you have always been the strongest person I know!"

"Th-thanks, Berdly," Noelle said with a sad smile. "It's nice of you to say, but the truth is...I've never been strong enough. I couldn't save my father. I can't save Kris or help Dess protect my mother. Everyone is counting on me and I can't even save myself. I'm just...a failure. I don't know why I thought I could be a hero."

"Noelle!" Berdly squawked. "You're thinking about this all wrong. There's more to being a hero than bending steel! There is also the greatest power of all: brainpower! And you, Noelle Holiday, are just as intelligent as I am! Maybe, um...maybe even more so."

"Um, thanks, I think..."

“The point is, you need to remember who you are! You are a top of your class science student and a Gastcorp intern! You’ve built amazing things and proven yourself time and time again! So if your strength won’t break your restraints, Noelle, then you will have to use your brain! Think! What are you missing? What is it that is holding you back from tearing through those steel bands like they were paper?”

“I don’t know, I just can’t lift my arms enough. I can’t even turn them around. They’re stretched out with my palms flat on the table and I can’t bend my arms at the joints enough to -”

She stopped abruptly, realizing even as she tested herself against the cuffs yet again what the problem was. She had been trying to push upwards at the wrists in a way that didn’t give her arms any leverage. She was using, at best, a fraction of the strength that she could have applied if she’d been pushing in the other direction.

So if she just pushed down instead...

Noelle braced herself, sitting up as much as she was able, and began to press all her weight down into her arms, her palms pushing hard against the unyielding steel surface. She clenched her teeth, sweat matting the fur of her forehead, muscles straining.

Noelle thought about her father, shot and killed on the floor of his own home without so much as a chance to say goodbye, a remorseless killer standing over him.

Noelle pushed harder.

She thought about that same killer heading back to that same house, at this very moment, to do the same thing to her mother. She thought about Dess and all the things that could go wrong if she tried to confront Chara without Noelle there to help.

The unyielding steel began to groan.

She thought about Kris, alone at the mercy of their ruthless father, a man who had already proven himself capable of killing those he claimed to love. A man who had wept crocodile tears even as he destroyed her family to serve his own mad ambition. Kingpin, the would-be ruler of monsterkind, the man who cried as he killed.

She pushed harder.

The steel began to *bend*.

Noelle screamed. She screamed as the metal dipped beneath her hands, forming a dent just deep enough for her to push her hands down into it and finally, painfully, twist her wrists around to face upwards. She couldn’t wiggle all the way free, but she could get a better position to push from.

She screamed as she pushed her palms into the restraints, bringing her full strength and leverage to bear against the bonds this time. She braced her elbows against the table and pushed up towards her chest like she was lifting weights, straining with all her might.

It felt like her arm muscles were going to tear before the steel did, like she might pass out from exertion at any second. But rage and determination kept her from stopping, from even letting up an inch. And sure enough, after long, long seconds of unrelenting effort, the steel cracked.

And Noelle.

Broke.

Loose.

With a cry of victory, Noelle threw the broken half-circles of steel away and sat up fully, turning her attention to her legs. Her arms were shaking, but it was easier to remove the ankle cuffs; she could just pull them up at the base, bending the metal with the combined pressure of her arm and leg muscles working together. By the time she slid off the table, she was weak and wobbly and hoarse from shouting, but she was free.

“Those sounds,” Berdly twittered in her ear. “That screaming! Noelle, are you well? Did you do it?”

“You were right, Berdly,” Noelle said, catching her breath. “It was just a matter of...leverage...”

Her head swam, but she shook herself, forcing herself to stay awake. This was no time for a nap, no matter how exhausted she was after all that.

She quickly took stock of the situation. Alone somewhere in the bowels of Gastcorp, save for Berdly in her ear. No mask, not that hiding her identity was her main concern anymore. No web-shooters, which would be a problem once she got out of here - but first she had to get out.

Not much time, either. Chara had a headstart on her, as did Dess. Exactly when each of them arrived at Holiday Manor would make all the difference.

Only one thing to do, then. Head out of this lab, find the nearest exit, and hope she could fight her way past security if they caught her.

Noelle took a deep breath. Steadied herself. And prepared to put her hard-won freedom to good use.

Chapter 16: Face the Music

Kris screamed into Kingpin's palm, but they only put a token effort into fighting back, into biting and thrashing and straining against the ropes that bound them. They should have struggled harder, but it felt futile. They were so tired, and Asgore was so strong. Their "father" may not have been the one to bring them into the world, but if he wanted to take them out of it again, Kris didn't have the energy left to stop him.

Let it happen. Let this haunt him forever.

But then another thought intruded, urgent and undeniable: *Noelle still needs you.*

Just at that moment, the sound of a doorbell gave them an unexpected stay of execution, the electronic chiming noise echoing through the apartment. Asgore looked up, staring across the living room, where a cold wind was blowing in through the hole in the shattered window.

"Stay here and don't move," he told Kris, and marched quickly across the room, shards of glass crunching under his heels. Kris, of course, disregarded that warning and took the opportunity to pull against the rope binding their wrists to their ankles. They suffered from an awkward angle with their arms behind their back, but it was only rope, and they had super strength - already they could start to feel it fraying as they strained and pulled it taut.

Noelle needs you, Noelle needs you, Noelle needs you.

Twisting their head to look across the living room, they saw Asgore by the door, looking at the security camera screen showing the person outside.

"Asriel," he rumbled, "what are you doing here at this hour?"

Kris froze for a moment in fear, before redoubling their efforts to get free.

Through a speaker on the panel, Asriel's voice could just barely be heard. "I saw the news alert, Dad. I - I had to speak to you. I had to know if it was true."

"It's not," Asgore said flatly. "It's nothing but media lies. A last-minute smear campaign, that's all. Now go home before your mother finds you out of bed."

Yes, go home, Asriel, Kris thought. Forget about me and get away from here. They didn't know what their brother was thinking coming here alone, but they didn't want him to go the same way as Rudy. They knew now, with soul-shattering clarity, that there was no limit to what Asgore would be willing to do if he was backed into a corner.

But Asriel persisted. "Please, Dad. Let me in. I need to see you say it. I want to see your face."

Asgore hesitated, looking over his shoulder back at Kris, who briefly stopped straining against the ropes and pretended to be sitting slack and obedient. Asgore's expression narrowed, as though he suspected Kris had something to do with Asriel turning up. Like they had summoned him there somehow.

"Alright, Asriel," Kingpin said, buzzing the door open. "You can come in."

And Kris opened their mouth to shout a warning, because they knew the first thing Asriel saw would be a ruined apartment and his sibling tied to a chair, and what would he do then? What would Asgore do?

But when the door swung open, it wasn't Asriel who stepped through it first.

Chief Undyne burst into the room, flanked by a trio of officers with guns drawn. "Don't move! On your knees, hands behind your head!"

Asgore looked furious, but he complied - what else was he going to do, fight his way out? Their plan had worked; he'd been backed into a corner, and just in the nick of time, too. Kris felt a rush of relief, mixed with vicious satisfaction. *I hope they lock him up and throw away the key.*

Undyne twisted Asgore's big arms behind his back and cuffed him with an equally enormous pair of handcuffs. "Asgore Dreemurr, I have a warrant for your arrest in connection to the murder of Rudolph Holiday. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law..."

"This is absurd, Undyne," Asgore started to interrupt. "You're making a mista-"

"Did you hear what I said?" Undyne cut him off. "You have the right to remain silent. I suggest you exercise it."

"I'm the victim here! I was attacked in my own home tonight!" He thrust his jaw towards Kris. "You can see for yourself the damage they've done. If I hadn't been able to subdue them, Spider-Human could have killed me."

"Kris!" Asriel shouted, finally spotting them. He pushed past Kingpin and the cops to run to Kris's side. For a second Kris opened their mouth to protest their brother blurting out their real name like that, before remembering that they were sitting there maskless in front of the police. So much for secret identities.

At that moment, however, they hardly cared. It was enough to see their big brother kneel beside them with concern etched into his fluffy face while he pulled at the knots that bound their wrists.

As soon as they were free, they fell into Asriel's arms, hugging him tight. "You have the most amazing timing."

"Screw you for webbing me to the couch like that," Asriel said, but he was practically crying in relief, hugging them closer.

"I was just keeping you in my back pocket," Kris quipped. Putting on a brave face felt a lot easier now that Asriel was here. "Knew I might need a last-second

save. Smart move calling in the calvary, by the way.” They turned their head at the sound of footsteps and saw Undyne power-walking towards them. She wasn’t pointing her gun at anyone just yet, but she hadn’t holstered it either. “Um, I think.”

They pulled away from Asriel. Old habits from Spider-Human’s long-standing contentious relationship with law enforcement told them to escape now and explain later, but there wasn’t much of anywhere to go, and after hearing their father try to deflect blame onto them, they figured that resisting arrest would be playing right into his hands.

Besides, Undyne had already seen their face. She could always arrest them at home later.

So instead they straightened their back, looked the much taller monster in the eye, and said, “Chief Undyne. We’ve got to stop meeting like this, huh?”

“Feels like we’re meeting for the first time,” Undyne said cautiously. “So, you’re the costumed vigilante the mayor’s had me chasing up and down the city for years now?”

Kris gave a little bow. “The one and until recently only.”

“And you’re also Kris Dreemurr.” She jerked her head at Asgore, who was watching the exchange from handcuffs across the room, an impassive expression on his face. “That guy’s kid, right? We’ve met before, when your dad had my job. Although maybe you were too young to remember me.”

“I remember. You’re wrong, though. I’m not his kid. I never was.” They shot a dirty look at Asgore. “I’m adopted.”

“Well I coulda told you that part...” Undyne muttered under her breath, rubbing at the back of her scaly neck. “So kid, if I try to take you in for questioning, you’re not going to shoot that gross webbing of yours in my face and run away, are you?”

Kris shook their head. “Not this time.”

Undyne turned to look at the shattered glass that was still letting in a chill early-November wind. “Were you the one who threw that piano out the window?”

Kris shrugged. “Only ‘cause he threw it at me first.”

“Hoo boy,” Undyne exhaled. She holstered her gun and replaced it with a pair of regular-sized handcuffs. “All right, Kris. You can tell me all about it at the police station.”

Asriel put a protective hand on their arm. “Kris...are you sure about this?”

“It’s okay, Azzy.” Kris put their arms out and allowed Undyne to cuff them. “You want to hear a story, Chief? I’ve got a doozy for you.”

They passed Asgore as Undyne perp-walked them out the door. He tried to step forward, the cops grabbing his arms to hold him back. "Asriel, wait."

Asriel, who had been skittishly trying to give Asgore a wide berth, whirled around to face him. "Why?" he snapped, uncharacteristically angry. "Why'd you do it, dad? What was it all for?"

Asgore stared at him like he had asked something so obvious it hardly needed stating. "I did it for you, Asriel. All my efforts, all my sacrifices...it was always for you." Then his expression hardened and he added, "Even if you were always too much of a crybaby to appreciate it."

Asriel recoiled as if he'd been slapped, his eyes wide and glistening. He ducked his head and hurried past, unable to look at his father, but Kris stared Asgore right in the eye, glaring defiantly at him.

"Do you really think this will stick?" Asgore said quietly with a sneer. "I have the best lawyers in the city. I'll be a free man again soon enough. And then, Kris, we can finish our conversation."

Kris held their gaze, steady and unafraid. "Looking forward to it...Kingpin."

It was only after they had passed him, after they had been led out of the building and into the back of a police car, that Kris lowered their head and let the tears they had been holding back spill free, behind their protective curtain of hair where no one else could see them weep.

Alarms blared in Noelle's ears as she sprinted through the labyrinthine hallways of Gastcorp. Emergency alert lights bathed the normally pristine white corridors in an ominous shade of red. It reminded of that fateful night in this very same building when Gaster's multiversal reactor had exploded and her life had been forever changed.

Only this time, nothing had blown up. The current state of emergency that had the building on lockdown and the scientists sheltering in their labs was because of her.

Stealth hadn't lasted long. She had tried to keep to the shadows and the ceilings at first, but an escaped doe in a red and green costume was hard to miss. There were too many eyes in this place, and too many cameras. She hadn't gotten far before she'd been spotted.

And frankly, Noelle preferred it that way. There was a time for taking things slow and stealthy, but it wasn't when her family's lives were in danger. The direct approach was faster, even if it meant Gastcorp would bring the full force of their security personnel to bear to try and stop her from leaving. Let them try.

It wasn't going to be enough.

As soon as the alarms had started sounding, she had shaken down a startled researcher for directions to the nearest exit. That and her familiarity with at least part of the complex from her internship days gave her enough of a mental map to avoid getting herself hopelessly lost. The only tricky part was going to be getting past all the guards.

And sure enough, as she rounded a corner into a central corridor that led to the building's main atrium, she was greeted by a small mob of monsters in security uniforms. They must have seen on the cameras which way she was headed and gathered there to intercept her. Most were armed with batons, a few with guns, though that didn't scare her; Noelle assumed Gaster would want her taken alive. She wondered what they had been told, if any explanation had been provided for why they were being tasked with subduing a fleeing teenager.

Though if the guards had any reservations about their orders, they didn't show it. As soon as they saw her coming, they charged forward to meet her. They had numbers on their side, and weapons, while all Noelle had was speed, strength, and a ferocious determination not to let anything stop her.

With a yell, she leapt into the air and delivered a kick to the chest of the nearest guard, strong enough to send him reeling backwards, knocking over those behind him like bowling pins. The sea of bodies parted momentarily, but that just meant that more came rushing towards her from both sides.

A man to her left swung his baton at her head. Noelle ducked, then popped back up with a quick right hook to his jaw. She didn't want to hurt these guys - they weren't criminals, just monsters doing their job. But without her webbing, she was forced to resort to more violent means of incapacitating them.

Some of those sympathies vanished as another man took a swing at her; she got a warning from her spider-sense in time to throw herself backwards, but the baton struck a glancing blow against her antlers that knocked her off-balance. As she fell, she swung her leg and knocked her attacker's own legs out from under him. Just before she hit the floor, Noelle reached back with her arms, pushed off the surface, and managed to turn the momentum of her fall into an athletic backwards somersault.

She landed in a crouch with her legs spread, one arm flung back behind her. The guards she'd knocked over were getting back on their feet now, ready for round two. And every minute she spent fighting was a minute she could have spent catching up to Dess and Chara.

She didn't have time for this.

Frustrated, Noelle jumped onto the wall and began to run along it, right over the heads of the crowd. She'd had enough of standing her ground. If they wanted her, they would have to chase her down.

She almost made it, too, the move catching the other monsters off-guard. Possibly they hadn't been warned about all the things their opponent could do.

But they reacted fast: One of the taller ones, a burly bull monster, reached up and seized Noelle's arm, ripping her right off the wall and into the center of the crowd below. She lashed out as she fell, kicking someone in the face, but it was too late, there were too many of them.

She felt hands grabbing her, boots kicking her in the ribs while she was down.

No.

The bull had her arms, he was twisting them behind her back, holding her down against the floor.

No no no.

She heard the click of handcuffs popping open, felt a link of metal tighten around her wrist.

No!

With an enormous effort, Noelle struggled to her hooves, forcing the weight of the larger monster on top of her upwards, carrying all the pressure on her back and somehow managing to stand anyways. She jerked her arms apart, tearing herself loose from the hands holding her down. The bull tried to grab her around her middle and lift her off the floor, but she just used his body as leverage to kick anyone who came near her, writhing and struggling like a monster possessed until he was forced to let her go.

As soon as he did, she rammed an elbow into his abdomen. When he doubled over, the wind knocked out of him, she whirled around and punched him in the jaw. The bull fell, nearly crushing one of his companions in the process.

Noelle took a few steps back from the remaining guards, fists clenched, breathing heavily. They hung back, blocking her path, sizing her up cautiously while she glared at them.

The halfway secured handcuffs were dangling from her wrist. She reached up and tore it loose, throwing the broken steel away to clatter onto the floor. "Okay, you jerks, listen up. I need to get out of here - there are lives at stake! So either you let me walk away, or I leave you all unconscious on the floor."

The guards hesitated, exchanging glances.

"Hurry up and decide!" Noelle snapped, her patience fraying. She didn't want this fight; her family needed her *now*.

But these men didn't care about that. They cared about keeping their jobs. So after only a moment's hesitation, they charged. Noelle braced herself to meet them with a frustrated snarl.

Noelle was a tornado of failing fists, each one hitting with the strength of a monster three times her size. She let the frenzy overtake her, ducking and weaving, punching and kicking, throwing monsters around like they were toys.

They got some hits in here and there; a punch to the face, a kick to the stomach, a crack of a baton against her ribs. Noelle withstood it all and returned every blow with a harder one. She knew that to hesitate would mean failure, and so she didn't stop; she didn't even let herself slow down to catch her breath.

Not until she ran out of people to hit.

Eventually, panting and wild with a pile of unconscious or groaning monsters around her, she let herself breathe again, slumped against the wall. Somehow she had done it. She had prevailed. There was nothing standing between her and her goal now save for her own exhaustion.

She shook off the weariness and ran on. Down the hall, through the doors, out into the high-ceilinged lobby, where the alarm lights flashed crimson and reflected off the glass walls.

She was almost there. She could see the street past the revolving doors of the exit, past the security checkpoint just inside, and past -

"Noelle Holiday!" a voice called out, bone-dry yet booming.

Dr. Gaster stood between her and the exit. He had more guards flanking him, these ones armed with more than batons, but he held them back with a gesture, stepping forward to confront her.

"I'm leaving, Gaster," Noelle said, fists balled tightly at her sides. "Get out of my way."

"Noelle, this is a mistake. You're risking your life, pushing yourself like this. The Determination in your blood -"

"Stop lying to me!" In an instant, Noelle had closed the gap between them and grabbed Gaster by the collar of his turtleneck sweater. He was taller than she was, so she pulled him down to look her in the eye, ignoring the guards pointing their guns at her - they wouldn't shoot while she was standing next to their boss.

"I can't trust you anymore!" Noelle shouted in his face. "You just want to use me for your own ends, just like everybody else. And even if you are telling the truth, it doesn't matter. Nothing matters except saving my family!"

"Saving your -" Gaster repeated. "I don't understand, Noelle. Saving them from what?"

"From the psycho human trying to kill them," Noelle said with a glare. "In case you didn't know, your little lab assistant is a spy and an assassin for the Kingpin!"

"Ah," Gaster said. "I see. In that case, I won't stop you." He calmly covered her fists with his hands and unpeeled her fingers from his collar, and Noelle released him, allowing him to straighten his spine again. "This betrayal comes as no surprise. I suspected that Chara was the one feeding Kingpin information, but I had no way to prove it, so I elected to wait for them to give themselves away. I suppose I should thank you for flushing them out for me."

“You *knew*? You knew how dangerous they were and you left me alone with them?”

“I wanted to see what they would do. I knew they wouldn’t kill you - you are, as I’m sure many people have pointed out to you by now, uniquely valuable alive. Targeting your family, on the other hand, is an unexpected move. Had I known that would be their play, I would have taken them off the board sooner.”

“You - you bastard!” Noelle spat, furious. “I can’t believe I ever looked up to you! Everything is an experiment to you, isn’t it? Just one big set of variables to manipulate.” She pulled her arm back, hand clenched into a fist. “I’m warning you, Dr. Gaster. Let me walk out of here unharmed, or I’ll go through you like I went through your men just now.”

The guards took a step forward, weapons raised at her display of aggression, but Gaster waved at them to stand down. “Peace, Noelle. I said I would not impede you, and I meant it.”

But before she could push past him, he held up a hand to stop her. “One more thing before you go.” He took a pair of metal wristbands from his coat pocket and handed them to her, along with her mask. “I believe these belong to you.”

“My web-shooters!” Noelle eagerly strapped them onto her wrists. With these back, she might actually have a shot at getting across town in time.

“It doesn’t have to be like this, you know,” Gaster said while Noelle hurried to replace the empty web fluid cartridges with fresh ones from her belt. “You were the brightest engineering student in the internship program that I’ve ever seen. I hate to see you wasting all that potential on childish costumed theatrics.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “You could still have a promising future with Gastcorp, if you wanted to. You could come back to us as a colleague instead of a captive. You could belong here.”

“I still want all that, Doctor. The job, the career, the bright future.” Noelle reached up and brushed his hand off her. “*Just not with you.*”

She muscled her way past him and broke into a run towards the exit.

“Sir, are you sure about this?” one of the guards asked Gaster as she fled.

“I am,” Gaster said. “Let her go. After all...” He took a vial of blood from the pocket of his lab coat and held it up to the light, like a jeweler appraising a rare gemstone. “She has given us so much already.”

Noelle swung through the steel and glass forest of New Home City faster than she ever had before; every arc timed and every webline aimed for maximum speed, every part of her laser-focused on her goal. She thought about trying to

raise Dess on the comms, but it would only have slowed her down, or distracted her sister at some pivotal moment. Every second counted. Had Chara had time to get there by now? Had she warned Dess in time to head them off, or would they both be too late?

There was only one way to find out. Noelle tried her best to focus on traversing the city, to not let her fear eat away at her insides, but she felt nauseous from anxiety, her heart thudding inside her chest. She couldn't lose any more family; it couldn't happen again. It couldn't, it couldn't, it couldn't.

Fear and hope kept up their warring drumbeats within her, right up until the moment she landed on the street in front of Holiday Manor. She cleared the gate in a single jump and sprinted up the driveway, breathing hard.

When she reached the entrance, she found an open front door and two bodies on the porch: the house's security detail. Even just at a glance, Noelle could tell that it was too late for them. Their suits were stained red with blood from multiple stab wounds, their eyes wide and glassy. But the blood was still fresh, still flowing; this had happened very recently.

Her spider-sense flared up a second before a piercing scream echoed from inside the house, followed by a crash like shattering glass.

"No no no no no! Mom!" Noelle shouted, sprinting through the open doorway and up the stairs, two at a time, towards the bedrooms. More heavy thuds from upstairs resounded with every step, and shouts, too - the sounds of a struggle.

And then, just as Noelle reached the top of the stairs, a pair of bodies burst through her mother's bedroom door and slammed into the wall.

Dess was still wearing her leather catsuit, though she had long-since lost her white wig, and her mask hung loose from her face, one strap torn, exposing a nasty cut on her cheek. Her teeth were bared in a snarl as she pinned Chara to the wall, one arm against their neck and one hand pinning their wrist, their fingers clenched around the handle of a bloodied knife.

Chara glanced in Noelle's direction, a sick smile on their face. "Well, well, look who came after me!" they choked out past Dess's arm. "Greetings, Noelle. You're just in time to join the party!"

Before Noelle could move to aid Dess in restraining them, her mother rushed into the hall, wearing a velvet robe and a look of shock. "Noelle, stay ba-" Carol's eyes fell on Noelle, covered head to toe in her Spider-Doe costume, and her expression of shock deepened. "Noelle?" she breathed. "What... Is that you?"

Secrets no longer served her, and Noelle was beyond caring about the consequences, so long as everyone was safe. She reached up and pulled the mask from her face, shaking out her hair and letting her mother see her. "Mom, are you okay?"

Carol looked pale; she clasped a trembling hand over her mouth. Even Dess glanced over to see what Noelle was doing.

And while the Holidays were distracted, Chara struck.

They went from limp to fighting in the span of a second, slamming a knee into Dess's stomach. Dess doubled over, gasping for breath and instinctively taking her hand off Chara's wrist to clutch at her injured abdomen.

Chara flashed a grin of triumph and stabbed the knife down towards the back of Dess's neck.

"NO!" Noelle screamed.

They were fast, but she was faster. The moment the knife was in motion, so was Noelle's webbing, a thin strand shooting out to intervene. It would be so easy for that strand to miss, the slightest miscalculation in timing or aim spelling doom.

But whether it was through dumb luck or desperate skill, Noelle's aim was true. And even as the web hit the flat of the swinging blade, she was already twisting her wrist, yanking back on the line, tearing the weapon out of Chara's hand.

The knife flew through the air, over Noelle's head, and embedded itself point first in the bannister at the top of the stairs.

"Get away from her!" Noelle roared. She charged at the assassin, head down and antlers pointed like spears. Dess staggered back just in time to avoid getting caught in the charge as Noelle bowled Chara over, knocking them bodily to the floor.

"You won't hurt my sister!" she screamed, raining punches down on Chara's face. "You won't hurt my mom! You won't hurt my family ever again!"

In that moment, all she saw was red. Red flowing from Chara's nose and mouth as her fists connected again and again. Red pooling under her father's body while she screamed, the gruesome sight seared into her memory forever.

Every blow, every shock of vibration through her arm, felt like a grim justice.

"Noelle!" Carol shouted, trying to grab her arm while she continued to hit Chara again and again. Blood was splattered on the floor, the human's face swollen and battered, but she couldn't bring herself to stop. "Noelle, control yourself! That's enough!"

"You don't understand!" Noelle wailed, as Carol and Dess teamed up to drag her away from Chara. "They killed him! They killed Dad!"

"What...?" Carol's grip on her loosened, and the elder Holiday dropped to her knees beside her, turning Noelle's face to look at her. "What did you say?"

"They t-told me," Noelle sobbed. She clung to her mother, burying her face in Carol's soft robe and staining it with tears, all the stress and horror of the day finally cracking her wide open. "They told me they're the o-one who k-killed Dad!"

Dess's voice sounded like a snarl from somewhere above her. "This... this human is the one I spent all those months looking for?" There was rage in her tone, cold and dangerous where Noelle's had been white-hot. "Where'd that knife go? I'll *fucking* kill them!"

"December!" Carol's voice was like a thundercrack. "You'll do no such thing." She gently peeled Noelle's grip off of her and got to her hooves. "I'll handle this."

She advanced on Chara, who had rolled over onto their side, coughing and spitting up blood. Carol knelt and hefted them up by their collar; they slumped limply in her grasp like a puppet with its strings cut. "Is it true? Did you kill my husband?"

Chara smiled, which had an unnerving effect with their split lip and already swollen face. "I did it for...him..."

Carol shook them roughly. "Him? Him who?"

"For...Asgore..." they said with a dreamy sigh, right before their eyes rolled back and they passed out, their head lolling limply to the side.

Carol unceremoniously dropped them and sank to the floor, her back propped against the wall. "Then it's true...what they're saying on the news. My campaign manager, she...she called and woke me up, but I didn't know what to believe..."

"You don't know the half of it, Mom," Dess said darkly. "Asgore is..." Her eyes shot wide open. "Oh shit! Kris! Noelle, what about Kris?"

"What *about* Kris?" Carol asked, directing a look of sharp confusion at her daughters.

But Noelle was already pulling herself together and putting a finger to the comms device in her ear. "Berdly, do you read me? Come in!"

"I read you!" Berdly said, receiving her call. "Noelle, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Me, my family...we're okay. But Berdly, I still need to go back for Kris. What can you tell me? Are they all right?"

"I think you had better check the news, Noelle," Berdly's reedy voice replied. "A lot has just happened."

Noelle didn't waste any time; she leapt to her hooves and hurried into her mother's bedroom, Carol and Dess trailing after her. The room was a mess - shards of glass littered the floor from a broken window, and a lamp lay on the floor alongside a toppled nightstand; Dess must have taken the most direct route to intervene on their mother's behalf, instead of charging in the front door like Noelle.

But the dresser with the small TV on the top was still standing, and so Noelle quickly grabbed the remote and turned it on. It was already tuned into Monster Network News.

“For those just joining us,” the reporter was saying. “Our top story tonight is a pair of shocking arrests at the private rooftop residence of NHC mayoral candidate Asgore Dreemurr, who earlier this very evening was the subject of a breaking news story from the Monster Bugle citing evidence seeming to implicate him in the murder of his political rival’s late husband, Rudolph Holiday. Police apprehended not only Mr. Dreemurr at the scene but also the costumed vigilante known as Spider-Human, who until tonight had long evaded arrest. In a stunning turn, the young so-called ‘superhero’ was revealed to be Asgore Dreemurr’s adopted child, a teenage human named Kris. What brought the Dreemurrs to blows remains unclear, but in light of the recent allegations, the long-standing public ties between the Dreemurr and Holiday families have sparked speculation that -”

Noelle turned the TV off - she had seen enough. She couldn’t bear the thought of Kris languishing in a jail cell, but at least for now they were safe.

She took a deep breath and turned to face her mother’s judgment.

But Carol looked more shocked than angry. “Kris is Spider-Human? And Noelle, you...you were there, at the debate. You fought the Condor and those gangsters. You were...” Noelle couldn’t tell if her mother was disappointed in her or touched. “You were trying to protect me.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Noelle said. Her regret was genuine. She had been afraid that if her mother knew, she might try to stop Noelle from being this new self that she was becoming. Might try to hold her back from chasing the exhilarating joy of that dream come true. But she knew the truth now: Being a superhero wasn’t all fun and games and thrilling adventures. It was messy. It was dangerous. And trying to keep her family safe and keep them in the dark at the same time only made everything riskier.

But it was hard to find the words to say all that, and in the meantime, Carol was beginning to bristle. “Do you have any idea of the situation you’ve put me in? And on the eve of the election, no less! I’ve made fighting for law and order a pillar of my campaign, for Angel’s sake, and now, to have my own daughter flaunting the law behind my back...”

“Geez, give her a break, Mom,” Dess cut in. “She just saved your life.”

“And you!” Carol said, rounding on Dess. “I suppose you’re in on this too, am I right? Just look at the way you’re dressed. All these...these immodest, skin-tight costumes.” She flared her nostrils in disgust. “Do you think you’re some kind of hero too, December?”

Dess shook her head. “No, Mom. I’m no hero. I’m something worse.”

Carol stared at the two of them, then sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “All right. You girls are going to sit down and tell me everything, this instant.”

But before Noelle could figure out where to even start, they were spared that awkward conversation for a little while by the sound of sirens pulling up to the

house. Noelle heard car doors slamming, and saw the red and blue flash of lights through the open door downstairs. The police had arrived.

“Took them long enough,” Dess said. She pointed to the broken bedroom window. “Come on, Noelle. We can leave the way I entered and cut through the woods. Then we can go break Kris out.”

But Noelle shook her head and caught her arm, stopping her. “And then what? We all go hide out in the subway tunnels like fugitives? Our enemies already know who we are, we can’t escape that fact. Asgore is definitely going to use that against you in particular. And this is our *home*, Dess. I’m not running away from this.”

“So then what do we do?” Dess asked.

“We face the music,” Noelle said. “We tell the truth and take responsibility.”

“Easy for you to say,” Dess muttered. “You haven’t really done anything wrong, Noelle. Not like me.”

“No, your sister is right,” Carol said. She was already dressing, quickly replacing her robe with more professional attire. “Fleeing the scene will only make things worse for you. Unless you expect the police to believe that I beat an armed assassin senseless all by myself.” She paused for a moment, seeming to consider whether she could sell such a story, only to shake her head and add, “But don’t worry - I’m not letting my children go to jail, no matter what you may have done. Whatever happens on Election Day, right now I am still the Mayor of this city.” She straightened her tie. “Come on, girls. Let’s go talk to the police.”

“Dressed like this?” Noelle asked, looking down at her costume.

“Didn’t you just say you wanted to tell the truth? You can’t have it both ways, Noelle.”

“Okay, say we tell the cops what really happened,” Dess said. “Then what? What the hell happens after that?”

“Then I do what all politicians do in moments like this,” Carol said. “Hold a press conference.”

Kris was tired. Tired of the bright fluorescent lights in the interrogation room. Tired of the way the handcuffs affixed to the cold metal table made their wrists itch. Tired of answering questions.

“Look, I’ve already told you the whole story,” they finally snapped at Undyne. “Why don’t you go question Kingpin instead?”

He would always be Kingpin to them from now on. Not Dad. Not even just Asgore.

"I have my best guy talking to your father right now," Undyne said, unperturbed. "We'll get to the bottom of all of this."

"You're going to have to dig through a mountain of misdirection first," Kris scoffed. "My d- *Kingpin* is a liar. It'll take a lot of pressure to make him tell you the truth."

"We'll see. I'd rather keep talking about you for now."

"I *told* you -"

"You've told me a lot tonight, Kris," Undyne interrupted, "but I don't think you've told me everything, have you? For example..." She made a show of reviewing her case notes and the scribbles she had jotted down in her notebook. "This female vigilante you've been seen swinging around town with lately. Spider-Doe, was it? How does she fit into all this?"

Kris hesitated. They had tried to be as forthcoming as possible, but this was a subject they had been carefully dancing around the whole time they were recounting recent events. Giving away their own secrets was one thing - if it strengthened the case against Kingpin, then that was their choice. But they had no right to give away Noelle's.

"She's no one," they said evasively. "Just...the new hero on the block, you know? I was training her."

"Like a sidekick?"

"Yeah, sure," they said, smiling a little as they imagined the indignant response Noelle would have if she heard that.

"And it's just a coincidence that the 'new hero on the block' has powers exactly like yours?" Undyne asked pointedly.

Kris shrugged. "Recognizable branding is really important in the superhero game."

"Uh-huh. Okay then, let me ask you another question, Kris. Why -"

But her question was interrupted by a commotion outside. Raised voices could be heard through the door, one sounding put-upon, the other furious.

"Ma'am, excuse me! You can't go in there! Chief Undyne is in the middle of an interrogation!"

"Chief Undyne will be interrogating her own @\$hole if she does not let me see my child!"

Kris flinched. You knew you were in serious shit when their mom started using such harsh language.

The door was buzzed open and Toriel stormed in, fire in her eyes. “Chief Undyne! I demand an explanation this instant!”

The officer by the door looked in apologetically. “I’m sorry, chief, I tried to stop her but she was *very* insistent.”

“It’s okay.” Undyne stood to face Kris’s mother. “Ms. Dreemurr. You can’t just barge in here and interrupt police business. I could have you thrown in a holding cell right next to your kid here if I wanted.”

Toriel raised herself to her full, considerable height. “You are welcome to *try*.”

“Mom!” Kris interjected. “I appreciate all the fury and thunder on my behalf, but I’m okay, really. I came here willingly.” They gave Undyne a slightly bratty smirk. “I mean, we both know I could have *not*.”

“Kris,” Toriel fretted, “I do not understand. I was awoken by a phone call informing me of your arrest, but the officer did not provide much detail. What did you do? And why on Earth are you dressed like Spider-Human?”

“Oh boy,” Kris sighed. “Chief Undyne, I know this is, er, unusual, but could we maybe have the room for a minute?”

Undyne looked unamused but resigned to the situation. “I’ll be right outside,” she said, jerking her head towards the one-way observation window along the wall.

One lengthy explanation later, and Kris was *really* feeling tired. They were getting pretty well-practiced at explaining all this, but it was different when it was their mother. Undyne at least had been a patient listener. And then there was the fact that every detail was an admission of an important secret previously withheld, a web of lies to support a double life that they’d been keeping from her for years now. She hid it well, but Kris could tell that the story hurt her.

“So let me see if I have this straight,” Toriel said once they had finished. “My ex-husband is a criminal who ordered your best friend’s father killed, and you have been secretly acting as a costumed crime-fighter under my nose, swinging around the city battling supervillains and getting yourself into Angel knows how many dangerous situations.”

Kris had left out the part where Kingpin tried to kill them because *wow, too much* and also the part where they were dating Noelle because *um, not relevant right now*. “That, uh, that about sums it up, yeah.”

Toriel took off her glasses and rubbed at her eyes. She looked tired, almost as tired as Kris felt. “Why is it that the second of those things is so much harder for me to believe than the first one?”

“Yeahhhh,” Kris sighed. God, they just wanted to go home and sleep for a thousand years. “It sucks. I mean, I figured you divorced him for a reason, but this? Who knew?” They perked up a bit, staring at their mother. “Wait. *Did* you know?”

"I knew there was a darkness in your father," Toriel said hesitantly. "He hid it well - I would not have married him if I had seen it back then. But over time, it... grew. I had no idea he would take things so far, but yes, it was his, shall we say, 'beliefs' that put a strain on our marriage. I tried to protect you from it, Kris, you must believe me. Asriel as well, but especially you, because -"

"Because of who I am," Kris said, unable to hide the bitterness in their voice. "Because I'm different."

"Yes," Toriel admitted. "But being different is no bad thing. You have grown into an incredible young soul, Kris, despite your father's influence."

"I had your influence, too."

Toriel smiled sadly and patted their hand with her paw. "I have done my best. Perhaps I should have done more. Perhaps then you might have trusted me instead of keeping all of this to yourself..."

"Mom, it's not like that. It's not that I don't trust you, it's just..." They faltered, unsure how to explain their motivations clearly.

"You do not have to say it. I understand. You thought that if I knew what you were doing, the danger you were putting yourself in, I would have disallowed it."

"Well..." Kris sighed. "Wouldn't you have?"

Toriel pursed her lips for a moment, then stood. "I am going to see about getting you out of here now. And then, once we are home, I am afraid I must insist on grounding you for a while. School and home only. No swinging around on webs looking for trouble! I will know if I see Spider-Human on the news again!"

"What?" Kris sputtered. "But - but - for how long?!"

"Until I have figured out how to not fear for your life every time you put that mask on!" Toriel said sternly. But then her expression softened and she added, "There will be plenty of time to talk about it later. I am... open to changing my mind. But first I would like us to have some time to be safe and to be a proper family, without secrets or danger. At least until this situation with your father blows over."

Part of Kris wanted to argue, to try and explain that being Spider-Human was important, that they were needed. But if they were really being honest? A break sounded pretty good. They were tired of secrets, tired of risking their life. Yes, they had a responsibility - they couldn't stay away from that for long. But the city also had Noelle to look out for it now. She was still so new at all this, but she had fought well against Kingpin, and she had leapt off a roof to save Dess from freefall without a second's hesitation. She was capable and brave. Which meant they didn't have to shoulder their burdens alone anymore.

"Okay," they told their mother, relaxing their shoulders. "That doesn't sound too bad."

Toriel smiled, but just then there was a knock on the door, followed quickly by Undyne entering. "Sorry to interrupt," she said brusquely, holding up her cell phone, "but I thought you two would want to see this."

She sat on the edge of the table, angling the screen so that both Kris and Toriel could see the video that was playing. It appeared to be a live feed from a local news network. On it, as the sun began to rise and the sky behind her was growing pale with the dawn, Carol Holiday was just wrapping up a speech in front of a crowd of reporters outside the gates of her home.

But that wasn't the part of the video that caught Kris's attention. That would be Noelle and Dess, standing next to their mother, unmasked but otherwise still in costume.

"My goodness!" Toriel exclaimed. "Noelle, too? Surely not..."

"Just watch," Undyne grunted.

"I want to reiterate," Mayor Holiday was saying on the video, "that although tonight's revelations have taken me by surprise as much as any of us, my commitment and resolve to keeping this city safe has only been strengthened by these events. Violence has no place in our society, political violence least of all. In times like this, it is normal to feel destabilized - to wonder who can be believed, who can be trusted. But we have the power, as a community, to forge a path through darkness and doubt and into a brighter and clearer future. On Tuesday, you will all get to exercise that power. I hope to receive your mandate to lead us into that future, and should you grant me that honor, I pledge to work every day to create a city where none of us need fear the corruptive forces of organized crime and violence."

"In a moment I will take questions from the press. But first, I would like to give someone else the chance to speak, and tell the world her perspective on tonight's events: My youngest daughter, Noelle."

Kris watched, unbelieving and yet oddly proud, as Noelle stepped up to the sea of microphones and flashing cameras. She looked nervous but resolute.

"Um, hi," she said quietly, then cleared her throat and spoke up. "I...I'm not much of a public speaker, so I'll get right to it. My name is Noelle Holiday, but there's another name I've begun going by recently. It's...kind of a silly name, but it's part of a legacy that I share now. Mine...and my friend Kris's. Like my mom, we care about this city that we call home, and we want to protect the people in it. Because this city..."

She swallowed, paused, and dabbed a finger across her eye. "This city has been lied to enough. My family was almost torn apart because of our secrets. My father Rudy was killed to protect another man's secrets. And that same man built an empire of lies that almost ensnared us all. Well, I for one am through lying. I'm not hiding anymore, and I'm not ashamed to let the world know who I am." She held up her mask and looked directly into the camera. "I never meant to become a vigilante, but I hope to earn the title 'hero.' I hope to earn your trust."

Because from now on, when I protect this city, I will let it look me in the eye and see me for who I really am. No more mystery. No more masks. Just Noelle.”

She smiled sweetly, a weight visibly lifting from her shoulders with each word. “Noelle Holiday, your friendly neighborhood Spider-Doe.”

Chapter 17: Great Responsibility

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Noelle stood in her bathroom, still wearing her costume, staring at a vial of blood in her hand. She had taken it off Chara's unconscious body when her mother and Dess weren't looking, when she was webbing the human up to keep them secure while the Holidays were talking to the cops. In a way, it had all worked out well - if Chara had been able to deliver this sample of Noelle's blood to the Kingpin, who knows where it might have ended up. Whatever secrets of Determination could be unlocked by her blood, that was one cat Noelle preferred not to let out of its bag.

Of course, Gaster still had a sample of his own. Noelle would just have to hope that he would use it for legitimate scientific purposes instead of some kind of unethical experimentation. A slim hope, knowing Gaster as she now did, but she couldn't exactly storm back into Gastcorp and demand that he hand it over.

Noelle couldn't say why she was hesitating to dispose of the blood sample. She had removed the cap and now held it over the sink. And yet something stayed her hand. Maybe it was because her blood was a reminder, a symbol of the danger she had just put herself in by announcing her identity to the press. It had been a somewhat impulsive decision, born out of her frustration with secrets and lies. And she did feel lighter now, relieved to have everything out in the open.

But going public also meant making herself a target for anyone who might want a piece of her, and she doubted that list would end with Kingpin, Chara and Gaster. She was already making enemies, and by publicly associating herself with Kris, she would inherit all of Spider-Human's as well. Whether for science or vengeance, a lot of dangerous people would soon be looking to make Noelle bleed.

Well, let them try, she thought, furrowing her brow in grim resolve. *They won't get a drop of blood out of me or my family without a fight. And they won't be getting this sample either.*

Noelle tipped the vial and poured her blood down the drain. Then she let out a long sigh and relaxed her shoulders.

Tonight, she was safe. Her family was safe. Her enemies were defeated, at least for now. Kris was still in custody, but her mom had promised to do everything in her power to get them free. Noelle and her mom and sister were going to have a lot to talk through together, as a family, but those conversations could wait until morning. For now, she could relax.

Noelle turned on the hot water and started filling up the bathtub while she peeled her costume off. She was going to start by taking a nice, soothing, luxurious bath.

And then, assuming she didn't pass out in the bathtub, she was going to sleep for a very long time.

ONE WEEK LATER

Noelle woke up to the sound of her digital alarm clock blasting "Jingle Bell Rock," because while it may have been November, it was never too early to start the day with a burst of familiar, comforting Christmas cheer.

Unless it was 7 AM on a Monday morning. Even Noelle's cheer had limits.

She groaned, rolling over on her pillow and shooting off a strand of webbing to snag the alarm clock and yank it into her hands. She shut it off, resisting the urge to just snap it in two instead. She then sat up and rubbed at her groggy eyes with her fists, careful to avoid touching the pressure plates on her palms and accidentally spraying herself in the face with her own webbing (live and learn!).

She'd begun wearing her web-shooters to bed a few nights back. It seemed safer, just in case. Between that and her spider-sense, there would be no more home invader assassins taking her by surprise.

Noelle rolled out of bed with all the graceful agility of a very sleepy spider and began to dress. At least she didn't have to hide her costume under her clothes anymore; if any villains attacked her at school, she'd have nothing to lose by going into action in a sweater and jeans. Not that she'd had to do that. Yet.

Besides, wearing her costume to school would have only made it harder to blend in and avoid drawing attention to herself. Maybe that was a lost cause, but that didn't stop Noelle from at least trying to go back to normal. When she had gotten up in front of those news cameras and told everyone her truth, she hadn't really been thinking about how much it would upend the normal social dynamics of her high school life. Frankly, school had been the furthest thing from her mind.

What she had been thinking was more or less what she'd said to the reporters: Secrets hadn't served her well. It was simpler, more honest, and more *Noelle* to be open with the world.

Sure, she maybe hadn't had time to discuss it in advance with her mother that she intended to continue being Spider-Doe, and yeah, maybe there were some legal concerns with that, considering her age. But whatever reservations Carol may have had about Noelle's extracurricular activities had dissipated in the wake of the election.

Turns out, while voters were predictably thrown for a loop by one of the candidates being accused of murder at the last minute, Noelle's announcement was far less damaging to her mother's candidacy. Spider-Human remained a popular figure among younger voters despite all the electoral campaigning

against vigilantes, so Spider-Doe being both the mayor's daughter and Spider-Human's girlfriend gave Noelle an air of legitimacy and made Carol seem cooler at the same time. And with Kris in jail simply for helping to put their criminal father behind bars, Carol had suddenly been facing a lot of public pressure to intervene on the teenage hero's behalf. There had been hastily-organized "Free Spider-Human" protests in the streets and everything.

Of course, Carol had been planning to step in anyway, but suddenly helping Kris was politically advantageous as well, so she made a last-minute pledge to do so. The 18-34 vote set a turnout record for a mayoral election, propelling Noelle's mother to a decisive victory. And while the pundits debated and overanalyzed where each fraction of a percentage point came from and the baked-in impact of the early vote on the results, all Noelle could do was breathe a long sigh of relief.

Some of the less reputable political commentators called it a conspiracy, claiming the evidence against Asgore was false and the whole thing was a scheme by the Holidays to steal the election. Noelle had some choice words for those people, but on her mother's advice, she kept her mouth shut and stayed out of it. The last thing she wanted was for everything she did as Spider-Doe to be politicized - although sometimes it felt like she had no say in that either way.

Still, it was enough for her that Asgore was in jail awaiting trial, as was Chara, both of them having been charged not only with her father's death but a laundry list of other criminal offenses. Asgore had lawyered up and was denying the accusations every step of the way; the legal fight would be long and protracted. But whatever happened, justice had caught up to him at last. Noelle took great satisfaction in that.

Before the results were even in, Carol made good on her promise, pulling strings with NHPD and the District Attorney's office and going to bat for Noelle and Kris, even at the cost of flip-flopping on her previous stance on superheroes. Soon Kris was out of jail - not having actually been charged with anything - and Noelle was in the clear as well.

Her sister's situation, on the other hand, had been a little trickier.

When Noelle headed downstairs to face the day that Monday morning, she found Dess already up and on the couch in the living room watching cartoons, a bag of chips in her lap and her hooves up on the coffee table in a pose that showed off her shiny new ankle monitor.

"Oh hey, Noelle," she said through a mouthful of junk food. "Is it morning already?"

"It's 7 AM," Noelle groaned. She may have slept all night, but she would still be rubbing sleep from her eyes until she got a cup of coffee in her - she had definitely picked up her mother's habits in that regard. "Why are you up this early?"

"Oh, I never went to bed," Dess said, grinning like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar. She had dark circles in the fur under her eyes, but she seemed surprisingly awake and alert - maybe all the empty cans of energy drinks on the

coffee table had something to do with that. “Insomnia’s been kicking my ass lately.”

“You have to fix your sleep schedule eventually,” Noelle said with a frown as she fished through the cabinets and fridge for cereal and milk. “Most of the world doesn’t run on a nocturnal schedule, you know.”

Dess rolled her eyes. “Yes, *Mom*, I know. Give me a break. I spent months running around the city all night, it’s gonna take more than a week to get used to not sleeping in the afternoon again.”

“Well, I guess you have time. How are you holding up under house arrest, anyways?” Noelle said from the kitchen while she filled the coffee maker. “I would have thought you’d be bouncing off the walls by now.”

The house arrest and ankle bracelet had been the best that Carol’s behind the scenes deal-making could do for Dess - she would stand trial for all her criminal activities eventually, but in the meantime, the courts had allowed her to be confined to Holiday Manor under her mother’s supervision instead of behind bars like Asgore. It had taken many long, heated arguments to convince Dess to get ahead of the game and turn herself in before Asgore could throw her under the bus, but Dess’s cooperation with law enforcement, and the fact that she had helped expose Kingpin’s crimes and take him down, meant Carol was hopeful she could persuade the prosecutors to offer Dess a plea deal.

It was a chance to throw Asgore’s attempt to blackmail her back in his face: Her testimony would help build the case against him in exchange for a reduction in the charges she herself faced. If she cooperated and provided useful information, she might only be sentenced to a short time behind bars if she was found guilty. That was still a prospect that Noelle didn’t like thinking about, but she knew Dess was tough. If anyone could survive prison, it was her. Hell, she’d probably be running the place within a week.

But that was a problem for another day. For now, her sister was here at home - all the time - and Noelle was content to just enjoy her company.

“Turns out I missed a lot of good shows during all those months I spent on an obsessive crime-filled quest for revenge,” Dess was saying, pointing at the cartoon on the TV screen. “Have you watched this one? It’s called *The Birdhouse*. It’s about a teenage hawk monster who falls through a portal into a world where monsters don’t exist, only humans, but she gets adopted by this batty old human lady who teaches her human magic and stuff.”

“Aren’t you a little old for cartoons?” Noelle teased. “Not too cool for kids shows anymore?”

“Hey, don’t knock it! Cartoons are for everyone!”

Noelle couldn’t help but giggle at the indignant tone in Dess’s voice. “Maybe they’ll make a cartoon about me and Kris one day.”

Dess snorted. "Yeah right. Can you imagine trying to turn our messed-up lives into family-friendly entertainment?"

Noelle finished pouring herself some coffee and preparing a bowl of cereal with a side of sliced banana and oranges, then plopped down on the couch next to Dess. She had to be getting to school soon, but that was a very fast commute when traveling by web-slinging, so she could afford to watch TV for a few minutes first. And the show did look fun.

"So when are they gonna schedule a date for your trial?" she asked while she ate.

"Dunno. Mom says it probably won't be for another few months at the earliest. These things don't move fast, but the wheels are in motion. And being stuck at home beats cooling my heels in a jail cell any day."

"Definitely," Noelle said. "I just wish they'd hurry up and make a plan. I don't like being kept in suspense."

"Yeah, me neither, but I'm also not in any hurry to go to jail, soooo. Y'know. Right now it's TV time." Dess took an overly vigorous swig of soda and wiped chip crumbs from her mouth with the back of her hand. "But enough about me, I want to hear about your plans. You...do know what day it is, right?"

Noelle nodded. "Kris and I are going to stop by after school. I wish you could come with me."

"I wish so too, but it'd be a bad idea." She patted her ankle bracelet. "Unless you want the cops swarming the place."

"I think we've probably given Undyne enough headaches," Noelle said with a smile. "But I'll say hi for you."

"Thanks, Ellie."

Noelle hopped off the couch and went to put her dishes away. "I'd better get going. Enjoy your show! Try not to go stir crazy alone in here, okay?"

"Oh, I won't be alone," Dess said with a wink. "Asriel's coming over later."

"Well in that case I won't hurry back too quickly after school," Noelle laughed. "You two can have the house to yourselves for a while."

Dess raised a hand to give her a fist bump. "I was hoping you'd say that. You're the best, super-sister!"

"How is Asriel doing?" Noelle asked while she washed up and double-checked that she had everything she needed in her backpack. "I know he's been in the group chat a bit, but I've been so busy lately that I haven't had time to really talk to him."

"He's, uh, you know. He's going through it," Dess said. "But I think it's going to be good for him in the long run. He told me he wants to change his major to game design."

“Aw, that’s great!” Noelle said cheerfully. “I bet he would make *awesome* games.”

Dess shrugged. “I told him it sounds like the nerdiest degree possible, which makes it a way better fit for him than poly-sci ever was.”

Noelle laughed. “Well tell him if he ever needs an expert gamer to help beta-test his game projects, he count on me.” She pulled on her backpack, satisfied that she hadn’t forgotten anything. “Okay, gotta run! Or web or whatever! See you later!”

Dess waved goodbye from the couch. “Have a good day!”

“You too! Get some sleep!”

Noelle left Dess to her cartoons and stepped out into the brisk fall morning. It was chilly, but the sun was out. The conversation with her sister had distracted her, and she was a bit behind schedule; not so long ago, leaving the house at this time would have meant dashing for the bus stop, praying she wouldn’t be late for class.

Good thing she would never need to take a bus again.

A few minutes later, she was speeding through the city, startling clouds of pigeons off of rooftops as she swung by. She hadn’t bothered to fully change into her costume, although she had it in her backpack, always there if she needed it. The only part of it she wore was her mask, because while she may have said “no more masks” to the news cameras, trying to swing through the air without something to keep the wind out of her eyes was *impossible*.

She eventually made it to the school, swinging down from an adjacent building and landing in front of the entrance. As always, she ignored the stares and whispers from other students pointing at her as she landed. She hoped that if she acted casual about it, her classmates would eventually grow accustomed to her manner of coming and going.

She was distracted enough by her thoughts as she passed through the front entrance’s security gate that she forgot to take off her web-shooters. The metal detector beeped, and the security guard held out an arm to stop her. “Again, Ms. Holiday?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I keep forgetting,” Noelle groaned. She really did forget that she had them on most of the time; those web-shooters were beginning to feel like a part of her.

“You know the policy,” the guard said. He was a plump walrus monster with large tusks and a severe handlebar mustache, and he was holding out a flipper expectantly. “No weapons allowed on school property.”

“I keep telling you, they’re not weapons,” Noelle complained, “they’re a wearable delivery mechanism for a high-tech synthetic adhesive. They’re more of a tool than anything with offensive capabilities.”

“Still not allowed at school. They’ll be here waiting for you at the end of the day.”

“It’s not fair,” Noelle grumbled as she removed the precious devices and reluctantly handed them over. “Kris gets to have their webbing at school, why can’t I?”

The guard scratched himself. “Because the Dreemurr kid apparently just shoots the stuff right out of their wrists. Can’t confiscate a kid’s arms, now can I?”

“What if a supervillain attacks the school and I don’t have my webs to defend people?”

“That’s my job, not yours,” the guard said. Noelle gave him a deeply skeptical look and he waved her away. “Go on and get to class and stop worrying about supervillains, kid, you’re holding up the line.”

Noelle stomped away, muttering angrily to herself and trying to ignore the other students staring at her. They were always, always whispering when she passed.

Which made it all the more startling when she rounded the corner and realized that no one in the hallway was paying attention to her. Everyone’s attention was fixed on some kind of disturbance up ahead, and a crowd had formed, clogging the hall. Noelle couldn’t tell at first what was going on.

And then she heard Susie’s familiar voice growl, “Stay still, you little freak!”

Oh no, not again!

Noelle tried to push her way through the crowd, but the other kids were too densely packed together. Frustrated, Noelle stepped back, jumped upwards with a flip, and attached herself to the ceiling. She crawled upside down over everyone else’s heads until she could see what was happening in the center of that circle of students.

Kris was fighting Susie. Or rather, Susie was attempting to fight Kris, and they were lazily dodging all her blows, their reflexes and spider-sense letting them dance circles around her without even having to fight back. Noelle was reminded of when she herself had done much the same thing, on the first day she had her powers. *Was this what it looked like? It’s a wonder I kept my powers secret as long as I did.*

But she couldn’t just hang back and watch, even if Kris could take care of herself. It wasn’t Kris she was worried for.

Noelle dropped from the ceiling, flipping around in the air and landing in a deep crouch. “Susie!”

“*There* you are!” Susie snarled, turning her back on Kris to face Noelle. Kris, for their part, looked utterly unconcerned. “I knew if I messed with your fellow freak, you’d come running.”

“Kris, is she bothering you?” Noelle asked.

Kris shrugged. "Nah, just getting my cardio in." They reached up to pat Susie on the shoulder as they moved past her to go stand by Noelle. "Thanks for the workout, Susie, it's good to have you back."

Susie bared her teeth. "Hey, don't just walk away! You weirdo heroes and I have unfinished business!"

"Susie," Noelle said, stepping forward, "do you really want to spend your first day back from suspension repeating the same offenses that got you suspended in the first place?"

"I got suspended because you *lied about me*," Susie said, pointing an accusing finger at her. "You owe me for that!"

Noelle glanced at the crowd. Everyone was hanging back, but watching intently. She even spotted Catty and Bratty among them, although neither of them looked eager to help out their former ringleader. Their phones were out, recording the confrontation, but Noelle didn't care about that anymore. Let the world see her sticking up for herself.

She had enough enemies though. She didn't need any more at school. If she was ever going to bury the hatchet with Susie, now would be the time.

"Susie, I don't want to fight you," she said, raising her palms in a conciliatory gesture. "I'm willing to let bygones be bygones."

But Susie met her with clenched fists and hateful eyes. "The only thing that's going to be a 'bye gone' is your good looks in about 10 seconds."

She thinks I look good? Noelle blinked in confusion. *Am I supposed to say something to that? Should I tell her she looks nice too? Okay, wait, hold that thought, she's about to punch me.*

Noelle ducked under the punch before Susie's fist even came close to connecting. "Susie, please. Stop this before you get yourself in trouble again. Kris shouldn't have lied about you assaulting them, and they're sorry, but beating us up for real isn't going to make things better."

"It would make me *feel* better," Susie growled.

Kris extended their arm towards Susie. "Need me to web her up for you?"

"Thanks, Kris, but I've got it under control."

"Control THIS!" Susie roared, throwing another punch.

Noelle stood her ground and caught the dragon girl's large fist in her open palm, holding Susie back without even straining her muscles. Susie was straining though, pants of hot breath spouting from her nostrils like little geysers of steam. She threw her other fist at Noelle's head, but Noelle caught that one too, leaving them locked in place with their arms up, grappling with each other like wrestlers.

Noelle looked her old bully in the eye and felt nothing but sympathy. “You’re not scary, Susie,” she said in a low voice. “You’re not my enemy, either - I’ve had *real* enemies, and you don’t make the cut. I just hope one day you’ll stop trying to pick fights you can’t win.”

She abruptly let go of Susie’s fists and ducked to the side, sending Susie staggering forward without Noelle to lean on. The onlookers in her path jumped back as she nearly barreled into them.

“Come on, Kris,” Noelle said, walking up the wall of lockers and over the heads of the other students. “We’re going to be late for class.”

Kris followed her, leaving Susie fuming behind them. Some of the teachers finally managed to push through the crowd, shouting for everyone to stand back and let them through, but by then there was nothing left to break up. Just Susie shouting after them.

“You think you can do whatever you want, Holiday?!” Susie raged. “You think you’re better than me? You think you’re a *hero*? You’re just a spoiled, lying little brat! I’d thrash your ass in a fair fight, you hear me?”

Noelle ignored her. She couldn't stop Susie from making mistakes, but she wasn't going to provoke her either. But how do you defuse someone who acts like your entire existence provokes them?

She waited until they made it to their classroom to pull Kris into a hug. “You okay?”

“Oh, totally. Did you see how I was mature and didn’t hit her?” They returned her hug, the tight grip of their arms belying their short stature. “I thought you handled that well, too.”

“Ugh, I don’t know,” Noelle said. She pulled away and sat down at her desk as the other students began to filter in, hiding her head in her hands. “What are we going to do about her? She can’t keep going on like this.”

Kris slid into the desk next to her. “Hey, you’re the one who wanted me to confess and get her suspension revoked.”

“It was the right thing to do! But at this rate, Susie’s going to earn another suspension, or worse.”

Kris shrugged. “Sounds like a problem that will solve itself if we just wait, then.”

Noelle shot them an annoyed look. “We shouldn’t be hoping for that outcome, Kris. Susie’s not some villain to be defeated and shipped off to prison. I still feel like she could be a better person than this if she wanted to. I just need to figure out how to get through to her.”

Kris snorted and shook their head. “You’re impossible. Literal superhero, dating another celebrity superstar, and you’re still trying to fix the stinky school bully.”

“Hey, you never know!” Noelle protested. “It’s not too late for a redemption arc! That sort of thing happens all the time in comics and shows!”

“Those stories are unrealistic,” Kris said. “This is real life, Noelle. The only thing that’s likely to happen is that Susie keeps trying to kick your ass.”

“My ass can take it...” Noelle muttered, blushing.

Maybe next time she tries to fight me, she thought, I should pretend to let her win? You know, just so I don't hurt her ego...

She looked down to realize that her nose had started glowing a little. Kris was looking at her with a raised eyebrow, but didn’t comment.

“It’s just...” Noelle added hastily, rubbing her nose. “We haven’t had a lot of victories that really feel like victories, you know? Wouldn’t it be nice to help redeem someone instead? Isn’t that the sort of thing that heroes should try and do? Inspire people to be better?”

“That *would* be nice,” Kris said, their expression darkening. “But it doesn’t always work like that.”

Noelle opened her mouth to say more, but before she could, Ms. Alphys burst into the classroom, late and flustered-looking as usual. Noelle decided to let it go for now. There would be plenty of time to figure out her Susie problem later.

Even as class got started and they turned their attention to their teacher, Noelle noticed that Kris still looked grim and distant, like their mind was elsewhere. She knew how they felt, but she didn’t want to let anything get her down, especially not today. Even with all the luck they’d had and all the things that had gone right, it was already hard enough to stay positive on the anniversary of her father’s death.

Noelle swung down to join Kris at the cemetery gates. She had raced them there after school got out, playing to their competitive streak in an attempt to lighten their mood, and it seemed to have worked: They had beaten her there by a good 10 seconds, and were all smiles about it.

“Hey,” Kris called as she trotted up to meet them. “What took you so long?”

“I was right behind you!” Noelle huffed. “You have got to teach me how to swing as fast as you do.”

“Can’t be taught,” Kris deadpanned. “I’m just naturally lighter and more aerodynamic.”

Noelle elbowed them in the ribs through their sweater. “That just makes it easier for me to pick you up and throw you.”

Kris paused thoughtfully. “That sounds kinda fun actually.” They glanced across the rows of headstones. “See that tall one over there? I bet I could clear it...”

“It’s a cemetery, not a disc golf course!” Noelle laughed. “We didn’t come here to goof off, remember?”

“Right,” Kris said, growing more solemn. “Are you ready, then?”

Noelle took a deep breath. It wasn’t the first time she had done this, but it was the first time on the anniversary. “I’m ready. But thanks for joining me for this, Kris. It means a lot.”

“Of course,” Kris said. “I...I miss him too, you know?”

“I know.” She gave them a quick kiss, and then they set off together through the enormous field of white graves and marble mausoleums.

They took it slow, winding their way respectfully through the paths between headstones, speaking in quiet voices. Noelle was glad they hadn’t come in costume. Street clothes felt more appropriate for this space that was thousands of people’s final resting place, as quiet and calm as anywhere in the city ever was.

“How are things going with your mom?” Noelle asked. “Any chance of an ungrounding soon?”

“I think we’re making progress. It’s been...hard to make her understand, but we’re getting there.” They giggled, prompting a look from Noelle before explaining with a snicker, “Sorry, sorry, I was just remembering. Last night I told her about the time I defeated Sandmonster by trapping him in a vacuum cleaner. We were both laughing so hard.”

Noelle giggled too. “That does sound pretty funny.”

“Did I never tell you that story? I guess not. God, I have so many stories to tell you.”

“We’ll make new ones too, once you’re back in action,” Noelle said. “Stories that we can share.”

They hesitated for a moment before saying, “I’m... I’m sure it won’t be much longer. I think I’m really getting through to Mom. It’s been kind of nice having the enforced vacation from heroing, though. The thought of being Spider-Human feels...different now.” They looked up at Noelle through their bangs. “What about you? All the attention must still feel weird. I know it does for me.”

“SO weird!” Noelle agreed. “It’s like I went from the quiet nerd to the school celebrity overnight. Your mom and the teachers are all trying to downplay it, treat me like any other student, but our classmates...I think they’re intimidated by me. I just wish they’d realize that I haven’t changed *that* much, that they don’t have to treat me differently.”

“I mean, I get it,” Kris said. “It must be weird sharing a classroom with your heroes. Imagine if someone else in our class had turned out to be Spider-Human, and you weren’t in the same boat as them. Wouldn’t you feel awkward being around that person?”

“I could be chill about it!” Noelle insisted. “I wouldn’t just let them be singled out.”

“You wouldn’t let them be *single*, you mean,” Kris smirked. “Didn’t you used to have a HUGE crush on Spider-Human?”

Noelle almost tripped over her hooves. “Wh-what?! No I didn’t!”

“Oh, come on, Noelle, don’t try to deny it. I saw what you were like, always doodling me in the margins of your notebook and stuff. Of course, that was before you knew it was me, so...” They sidled in a little closer to her, looking up at Noelle with their dark, mischievous red eyes. “It’s probably pretty embarrassing in retrospect, huh?”

“K-Kris!” Noelle said; it came out as a flustered squeak. “Are you really trying to flirt with me *here*? Have some respect for the dead!”

“I think the dead would be happy for you.” They took her hand and gave it a squeeze. “At least, I know one of them would.”

Noelle’s flustered embarrassment melted away. She smiled and squeezed their hand back, and they resumed walking, hand in hand.

“I wish he could see us together,” Noelle said after a while. “I think you’re right, and it would have made him happy.”

Kris nodded. “I can almost hear the dumb dad jokes he’d make. ‘Always hoped you crazy kids would get together.’”

Noelle gave a hiccup of a laugh. “At least I know he’d be supportive. My mom’s still coming around to the idea. She thinks you’re a bad influence.”

“Well, she’s right,” Kris grinned. “But I can’t take all the credit. I think you would have been a hero with or without me.” They paused, looking up at her seriously. “I mean it, Noelle. I don’t believe in fate or some big cosmic web of destiny or whatever, but...I think you have a calling. Like, you were born to be a hero. A better one than I ever was.”

“I don’t know about that, Kris,” Noelle said kindly.

“I guess we’ll see,” Kris said. They looped their arm through hers and kept walking. “Come on, we don’t want to keep your dad waiting.”

They walked onwards together in comfortable silence, birds chirping in the trees above. It was a gorgeous day for mid-November, the sun shining warmly on their heads, the grass green from recent rainfall. Noelle was glad for Kris’s steady presence and kind words, even if they *did* also tease her relentlessly. They had been through so much together; she was confident they could handle whatever

else was to come. Wondering what exactly that might be sent a thrill of nervous excitement through her.

Kris was right about one thing: Noelle had always liked Spider-Human. But they had always been a concept to her, not a person. Kris was different - they could be both a true friend and a rare kind of partner, one who matched her like no one else could. In both heroic adventures and ordinary life, Kris was someone she could not just admire, but love.

And they were hurting. She knew that. They kept it inside most of the time, but their altercation with Asgore had been uniquely traumatic for them, in ways that Noelle could only guess at. They still hadn't told her what had passed between them and their dad after she dove off that building to save Dess, only that Asriel had made a timely intervention. Maybe that was really all there was to the story, but Noelle got the sense that something else had happened. That there were things Kris wasn't ready to talk about yet.

When they were, she would be there for them. From now on she would *always* be there for the people she loved, no matter what. She had promised herself that she was never going to fail them again, and she meant to keep that promise.

Eventually, their leisurely stroll brought them to their destination: A large, expensive headstone of frosted marble with a blue tint to it, the color of a frozen lake on a winter's day. Etched into the headstone were the words:

RUDOLPH 'RUDY' HOLIDAY
BELOVED HUSBAND AND FATHER

The sight always brought a lump to Noelle's throat, but she swallowed it down and brushed away the tears forming in her eyes. After everything, on today of all days, she could be strong.

Kris squeezed her hand again and retreated a few paces, giving her some privacy. "I'll be right over here."

Noelle crouched down and unzipped her backpack, removing something that was tucked away there on top of her costume: a Christmas wreath, made from lovingly bound pine branches, adorned with sprigs of holly and a red bow at the top. It was early yet to be buying these at the store, but Noelle would never have settled for a cheap artificial wreath anyways. This one was hand-made, assembled from the branches of the trees in her backyard.

She gingerly propped it against the base of her father's grave. Her spin on an old tradition, and the start of a new one as well. A wreath for Rudy, every year.

"Hi, Dad," Noelle said softly. "It's been a while since we spoke. Or at least, it feels like a long time. A lot has changed. *I've* changed. But I think..." She paused, swallowed, blinking away the tears and letting herself smile. Her dad had always loved to make her smile.

“I *know* you would be proud of the person I’m becoming.”

END OF VOLUME 1

Chapter End Notes

As they say in the movies: Spider-Doe will return.

What's that? You want to know WHEN Spider-Doe will return? Uhhhh...eventually! As of this writing I have written approximately 0% percent of the sequel. But I have started outlining it and Boople has been helping me brainstorm a humdinger of a plot. I knew going into this fic that there would be some classic Spider-Man elements that I wouldn't be able to fit into the origin story, but that would be perfect for a sequel. So as soon as I can knuckle down and write for a few months, I'll have some fun stuff coming your way. Please look forward to it! And don't forget to subscribe to my profile or the series page if you want to be alerted when that comes down the pipeline!

On a more personal note, this fic has been a joy to write and I've loved seeing everyone's reactions in the comments. It's been a ton of fun remixing two of my favorite things, but I wasn't sure how such an off-the-wall crossover AU would land with readers - so I'm very happy that everyone has embraced it with such enthusiasm. Here's to you, True Believers, and I'll see you next time! Excelsior!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!